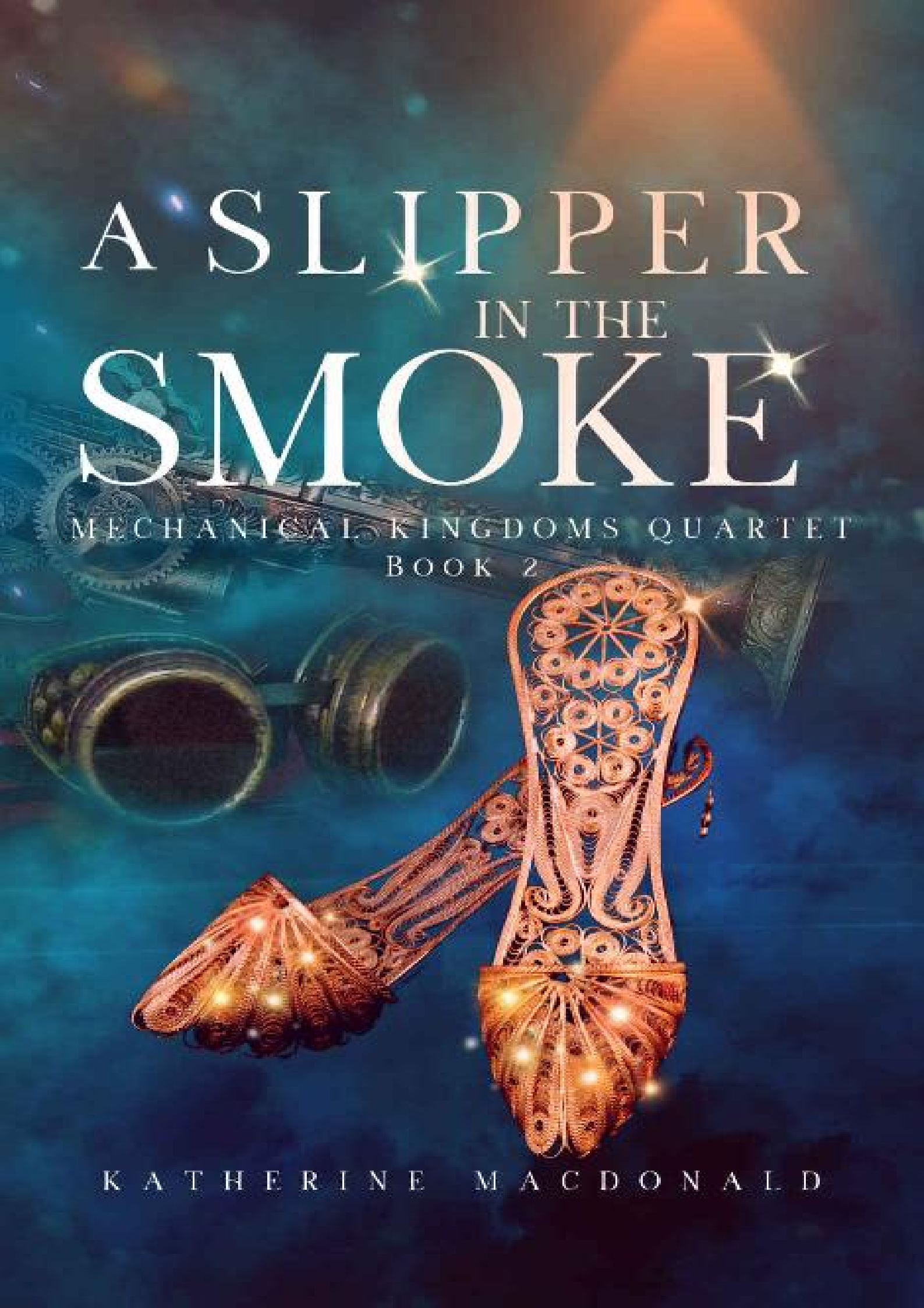
A SLIPPER IN THE SMOKE

MECHANICAL KINGDOMS QUARTET
BOOK 2



KATHERINE MACDONALD

BOOK 2 OF THE MECHANICAL KINGDOMS QUARTET



A SLIPPER IN THE SMOKE

KATHERINE MACDONALD

A Slipper in the Smoke

Katherine Macdonald

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Also By Katherine Macdonald

Acknowledgments

About the Author



Her stepmother told her that Petragrad was her home now, but even though she had been there almost six years, the steely, suffocating city had never felt anything like home to Elena. Perhaps it might have come to feel that way, had her father not died only a few months after they relocated, had her step-family embraced her, had there been maybe just one, tiny, small, minute thing she liked about the city…

But there wasn't.

Far from the rolling fields of Navarra, Petragrad was stifling, loud, cramped; a roving, creaking metropolis of gears and grease, a place where smog was a touchable creature, as thick and movable as clay.

It was not her home.

It was her prison.

But not my coffin, Elena whispered to herself, walking through the lower ring on her way home one evening, mask drawn up tight. *Not my coffin, not my coffin.*

She thought of her father's ashes on the mantelpiece in Baroness Hernandez' apartment, the tiny pewter container that held the earthly remains of the person she'd loved most in the world.

It had been his coffin.

One day, Papa, I'm going home. And I will take you with me.

Her mother was buried beneath a tree in the grounds of what had once been the Hernandez' estate. She wanted to take him back there, to rest beside her. The land no longer belonged to them, but she would find a way to make it happen.

Nothing in the world belonged to her. Even the clothes on her back weren't hers, as the Baroness constantly reminded her.

"Elena, Elena, my little bee," she'd croon, "everything you have is what I have given you. Everything you have is what I can take away."

Not forever, Baroness, Elena thought to herself. *One day I shall be free of you.*

But the tickets back to Navarra being so expensive, Elena knew it might be many years yet. The Baroness controlled all the finances. She'd tried to set up her own bank account once, but the bank had required proof of residency. The Baroness took care that Elena had nothing to her name. Not one thing.

Nevertheless, Elena had a plan.

She'd always been good at fixing things. As a child, she'd watched the farm hands fixing the harvest machines, saw how the intricate engine of cogs and gears broke down into something simple, like the wooden shapes of a children's toy. Things slotted together easily in her head, and before long she was skipping piano lessons to tinker in the barn. She watched others to understand the basics, but mostly she learnt through trial and error, through devising and experimenting.

Machines were her passion, but they were also her escape, a way to breathe in a stifling world, a place where things made sense even when everything else was falling apart. Three days after her mother died, she returned to the barn, and found the rest of the world blurred away between the slotting of the gears, the clang of metal and oil. It did not erase death, but she felt like she could build a cage around herself, protecting her from the crushing weight of grief, only letting it in little by little.

There had been no place for messing with machines when they moved to Petragrad. The Baroness had kept a few automatons at her residence, but they were maintained by someone else and Elena was forbidden from interfering with them.

"You are a lady, now," the Baroness admonished, as if ladies couldn't also be engineers. "You must act the part."

Elena disliked 'acting' in one's own home. Disliked being false in general. But in the Baroness' home, everyone was acting. It was a theatre, a show of a happy family.

By the time her father died, the facade had too, and all but one of the bots had been sold. The day her father's ashes were delivered to them, the Baroness had seized a frying pan and smashed in the head of the remaining automaton in a fit of rage. Gears and oil trickled over the carpet, thick as blood.

The automaton collapsed.

"*Mother!*" shrieked Elena's eldest stepsister, Ivanka. "What are you doing?"

But the Baroness had been unable to express what she was thinking, or feeling, and had stormed out of the room.

Elena had stared at the mechanical mess on the floor, and went to borrow a toolkit from their neighbour. For hours, she worked on the damage, bending back the bent gears, sliding tiny cogs back into place.

It was as peaceful as she could get. For a minute, she imagined herself home, beneath the warm rafters of the barn, the smell of hay and oil intermingled.

Home. Home. Home.

She couldn't fix the cosmetic damage, but the automaton worked better than before.

When the Baroness saw it working later in the day, her eyes went wide. Elena braced herself for the verbal onslaught, but was met instead by a kind of shocked amazement.

"How is that working?" she asked.

“Elena fixed it, Mama!” cried Elena’s younger stepsister, Mariah. “Isn’t she amazing?”

The Baroness lay her chin against her long, pale fingers, her cool blue eyes glinting in the dim light of the apartment. “An amazing *opportunity*.”

The family fortunes long dried up, the Baroness had no income. Elena became the family breadwinner. The Baroness rented a garage in the outer ring, as cheap as they came, sourcing the simplest of tools, and set Elena up as a mechanic. It was a poor use of her talents. Elena could *make* things. Tiny mechanical bees like the ones used to pollinate the fields, great beasts to pull equipment and harvest the crops, self-moving carts. But the Baroness spared no money for these endeavours, and no time, either. From dawn till dusk, Elena worked in the garage, fixing things for the middle ring, praying the filters worked and that she wouldn’t succumb to the black death that had stolen her father.

Her one way out was the metal canister she kept under her workbench, where she was slowly saving up for her escape. Although most of her clients paid the Baroness directly, occasionally, rarely, someone would offer her cash for a job her stepmother didn’t know about, or she’d devise something out of a few bits of scrap metal that she could sell for a handful of coins.

It would take years, but she would get there.

Elena turned the corner and caught sight of the coal plant a few streets away, a dark, towering monstrosity vomiting black

fumes into the air. Armoured guards patrolled the newly-fortified wall. It had been erected a few months ago when a handful of rebels tried to break into it. There was a rumour going around that the coal was made using the bones of the dead, and darker rumours that it wasn't the dead at all—that the Crown took those dying from the coal sickness or purposefully infected people in the first place, making fodder of their citizens.

Elena hoped it wasn't true, because that would mean her father's ashes weren't his, and his body…

She looked at the black smoke, and shuddered under the weight of it.

Who are you, if not what? What faces did you wear, once?

The Crown, of course, denied all such rumours. "The rebels will say anything to sew the seeds of discourse," was the official response. "Do not let it infect you, loyal citizens."

It had been a long time since there had been any cases of coal sickness, though. Almost like something had made it back off.

Elena hoped it wasn't true. That did not mean she thought it wasn't.

Someone bumped into her shoulder, running at speed towards the factory. Cries tangled with the smoke, and she realised a crowd had gathered at the gates, crowds with placards. "WE NEED ANSWERS!" "Show us our dead!" "Man cannot live on smoke alone."

Elena's stomach twinged like it always did when she saw displays like this, some intermingling of guilt and fear. She always wondered if she should be joining them. *She* wanted answers too, but she wanted to go home more. She couldn't risk doing anything to jeopardise that.

"Interesting times we live in, aren't they?" said a raspy voice from the side of the street.

Elena turned. An old woman sat in the shadows of an old warehouse, perched on an upturned crate. She was as wrinkled as a prune in a pint glass, and just as miniature. Elena knew her, at least, a little. She was an old storyteller known by the locals only as Grandma.

Sometimes, when she finished work early, Elena would go to the old market square at dusk to listen to her speak. She liked her tales; they reminded her of home. The old woman told stories that came, in part, from the Holy Book of Navarra. Navarra was unique among the Mechanical Kingdoms in that it still retained a religion. In all of the others, while it was not outlawed in principle, public worship was not permitted. In theory, this began as a rule to dissuade uprisings in the name of religion, phrased under the much more palatable, "Faith belongs in people's hearts, and no person or place shall hold the reins to it" but it just seemed to Elena like another way to control people.

And as for uprising? People would always find a way.

"You all right, dear?" Grandma prompted. "You look far away."

Elena blinked, surprised to be spoken to. “I am always far away.”

Grandma smiled. “Back in Navarra again?”

I never left. But she only nodded, surprised Grandma remembered this about her. Maybe it was her accent. She hadn’t shaken it, not in half a decade. Sometimes she said words and realised they were twinged with the bluntness of the Petragradian twang, the softness of Navarra sloughing away. At night, she’d repeat the words to herself in her true voice, colouring the molecules of it.

I shall not lose this. I shall not.

A roar went up from the crowd. “You should hurry home,” said Grandma sagely. “It looks to be getting rowdy.”

Elena nodded, readjusting her mask, and hurried down the street. The crowd was getting larger, louder, rising like a furnace. A group of folk had crowded around one of the vans trying to gain access to the plant, gathering around a singular side. The van heaved on its axis, slowly tipping.

It landed against the cobbles with a terrific crash.

A shot rang through the air. “Enough!” said a soldier, emerging from the van. “The next one goes through one of you!”

A still, shifting silence passed over the crowd, but it did not last long. A smoke bomb exploded on the side of the street. The soldier fired again, but another citizen charged at his waist, knocking him to the ground as a second shot let off.

People ran, streaming down the streets. Elena, desperate not to be caught up in it, started to run too, sprinting away until her lungs burned and the sounds of the scuffle were muted and rough. She stopped for a minute on a street corner beside a cart selling hot buns, her mouth watering, the aroma of the sweet, baked dough erasing the momentary panic of earlier. She didn't have a coin on her for the bread, and she wouldn't have wasted it anyway; the Baroness' apartment was not far away.

She took a moment to slow her breathing, and carried on her way, arriving at the entrance to the middle ring not long after.

The Baroness' apartment leered over the side, staring out on the grim, dark city. It fringed the outer ring, connected to the dirt and grime. Smoke still crawled through the windows, but it was the best they could afford when the finances started to flounder.

At least it still boasted an elevator, although it was frequently out of order. It saved Elena having to walk up ten flights of stairs, and gave her a moment to collect herself.

She stared at the blackness on her hands, the dirt and grease, the scars and burns. She remembered a time when they were small, soft and dainty. Even after she discovered inventing, her mother was there to doctor her slightest injury, to soothe her chafed hands with cream. They had still been the hands of a lady, a girl who liked festivals and parties and dancing into the night.

Elena stared at her reflection in the cracked elevator mirror. No one would ask her to dance now. She'd shorn her long

brown locks some years back when they kept getting in the way, secretly selling them for a few coppers she'd added to her canister. Her hair now hung just above her shoulders in messy waves. Beneath the dirt was a face that had once been pretty, with brown sun-kissed skin and green-flecked eyes. Her cheeks were hollow now, although her shoulders were broad, her arms too muscular to fit in the dainty gowns of her youth.

She missed them. She missed the silk and gossamer, the girl she'd been, the one that might still exist, buried beneath all the grime and the other thing, the veneer of blackness she had no name for. Sometimes she thought she would do anything but trade her escape for one night of being that person again.

The elevator slowed to a stop, and she stepped out onto the floor.

The building might once have been grand, or wanted to be, before the factories drained it of life. The carpet looked like it had once been printed with a pattern of red and gold, but over the years had blackened into something more like browned blood. It stank of sweat and ale and grease, the kind that seeped into the chequered walls, the wood of the doors, the fake flowers in the chipped vase along the hallway. Elena had long since given up holding her nose as she trudged towards the Baroness' apartment, paying no attention as her boots squelched along the carpet.

If she was lucky, the Baroness would have retired for the evening. She could sneak along to the main bathroom and

draw herself a bath, maybe even chance her luck with the soap…

But luck had not favoured Elena in a long time.

The Baroness stood at the window when Elena entered, a dark silhouette against the gathering dusk. She was dressed for bed in a red silk ensemble, wine glass in hand, surveying the streets like a queen might survey her kingdom. The long, crimson nails on her free hand tapped against the ebony wood of the dresser, and her black hair was unbound around her back and shoulders.

Elena stilled, closing the door softly behind her, praying that she could still slide in unnoticed.

“You’re late,” said the Baroness coolly.

Elena stiffened. “There was a riot—”

“I do not care for your excuses,” said the Baroness, back towards her. She let out a slow, controlled sigh. “What am I going to do with you, Elena?”

Elena would like to have had some sharp comeback, but the words had dribbled away from her long ago. It never did to answer back, to remind the Baroness that she was her only source of income. The Baroness was Elena’s only source of food and shelter. Elena had nothing and no one to turn to. The Baroness had seen to that.

“Luckily, I have a way you can make it up to me,” the Baroness continued. “I have another job for you. Just a small

one. Shouldn't take too long. But my friend the Marchioness needs it finished by tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow—" Elena started. It was already late. To go back to the garage now—

"Tomorrow morning," said the Baroness, voice steely. "Like I said, it should only take you a couple of hours. A servant should be bringing the package to your workshop soon. I suggest you make haste to receive it."

A couple of hours, plus the walk there and back. She wouldn't be finished until past midnight, and that's if the Baroness' estimation was correct.

"Can't I get up early tomorrow and—"

"And risk the project not being completed in time? Ruin our reputation to the Marchioness? Absurd. You should be grateful for the opportunity."

Elena didn't know how fixing some machine for the Marchioness was going to gain the Baroness any favours, but she did not argue. There was no point. One way or another, the Baroness would have her way.

Elena bowed her head. "Very well, Stepmother. I'll just grab something to eat—"

"You will not," snapped the Baroness. "You shall eat when you return and not a moment before."

Elena stared at her, waiting for the words to change, to rearrange them into something more fair, something that made

sense, something that didn't mean she had to trudge all the way back to the workshop on an empty stomach.

"Well?" the Baroness arched a black brow. "Why are you standing there, wasting yet more time?"

"Of course," said Elena, still feeling numb. "I will do as you bid." *For now. Only for now.*

She turned on her heels, catching a flash of a narrow, pale face in one of the doors, one that looked like the Baroness', only twenty years younger, not whittled down by age and grief and whatever else had squirmed its way into the Baroness' features over the years.

It was Ivanka, her mouth thin and tightly set.

Elena didn't stop to pay her any attention, exhaustion and hunger occupying her thoughts. Instead, she moved swiftly towards the door and back down the lift.

She leant against the railing during the descent, trying to snatch something like a break. She felt wobbly, from the confrontation, the order, or the need for food and sleep, she wasn't sure. It was not the first time the Baroness had denied her these things, but it didn't happen so often, not any more. Partly because Elena had stopped resisting, but partly because the Baroness had realised Elena worked better when she was fed and rested.

She still made sure she had less than the rest of the family, that she was sustained by scraps and leftovers, the parts no one wanted.

Like me, she realised. *I am the part that no one wants. The scraps. You are what you eat…*

She tried not to fixate on that dark thought, tried to ignore it completely. You could lose yourself to that, when you realised there was no one in the world who wanted you. Connections were what bound people to the earth. Without any at all, she sometimes wondered what stopped her from evaporating like water.

Hope, she supposed. Hope that it wouldn't always be like this, that things would be better, that home was a place she could return to if she worked a little harder, survived a little longer.

But hope was a fickle thing, and hard to grasp onto when starvation gnawed at her belly.

I just need to do the job, she told herself. *Do the job. Go home. Eat. Sleep. You'll feel better then. Everything's brighter in the morning…*

The crowds were dispersing by the time she made it to the outer ring, the place swarming with guards, stomping through the streets in their dark green uniforms and polished pistols and sabres.

"You, girl!" said one. "Halt!"

Elena stilled in an instant, barely even turning when she caught the muzzle of a pistol trained in her direction. Her heart trembled.

The guard was part of a pair, but standing behind them was a dread doctor, one of the elite palace guards that patrolled the streets for those suffering from the black death. He was monstrously tall, wearing dark green robes that draped to the floor, and a portable filter that fitted to his face in the form of a beaked mask. Blackened goggles obscured his eyes, making his gaze dark and soulless, impossible to read.

“Identify yourself,” snapped one of the guards, while the dread doctor stared sightlessly through her.

“Elena Hernandez,” she rushed.

“Place of address?”

“42 Sunrise Terrace, Apartment 28.”

Another soldier beside him scribbled something down. “I’ve seen you around here before, haven’t I?”

“It’s possible,” she said. “I’ve got a workshop nearby.”

“You’re a…” His eyes swept down her clothing. “Mechanic?”

“Yes.”

He nodded to his partner. “She’s not the one we’re looking for.”

“You’re sure?”

“Certain.”

The soldier dropped his weapon, and tipped his cap at her. “A pleasant night to you then, young lady. Take care on the streets.”

They vanished without another word.

By the time Elena got back to the garage, she was already tired enough to roll under her workbench and sleep. She pulled up the door, ducked under it, and clicked on the light.

A tiny automaton shaped like a winged cat shot out of the door, whizzing against her ankles in a whir of bronze and gears.

“What—”

Elena didn’t have time to think about where it came from. Before the thought crossed her mind, a pistol clicked behind her.

“Don’t scream,” said a voice, weak and trembling.

Elena turned just as the intruder slumped, pistol falling to the floor, and found herself face-to-face with a bloody, black-haired girl.



Half a dozen small automatons whirred around the room, clicking and screeching, cutting off Elena's path from the semi-conscious woman on the floor of her workshop. Her leg was bleeding, and there was a bloody mark on her forehead beneath a tangle of black curls.

Elena knew she should call the authorities. Whoever this girl was, she had broken into her garage, and clearly had nowhere to go despite her wounds, which meant she was likely on the run from the law. Given what had just happened at the plant within the last hour, Elena was willing to bet she was likely one of the rebels.

A criminal. An outcast.

Yet it was her bleeding out on a dirt-covered floor, not a palace guard or soldier. It was she that was afraid.

The Holy Book had a lot to say about how to treat those in need, and if Elena called the guards on her now, she was fairly sure she would be ignoring a lot of it.

Instead, she turned to a nearby drawer and whisked out the cleanest rags she could find. The automatons scurried around her face and ankles, as if waiting to see what she would do. She placed the rags to the girl's wounds and rolled her over, kicking the discarded weapon out of reach. Just to be safe.

"Are you… helping me?" the girl whispered.

"As long as you don't shoot."

She levered her into a sitting position and tore through her medical kit. There wasn't much in it—the Baroness didn't much care if Elena was hurt—but there was cleaning fluid and bandages. Elena wasn't used to applying them on anyone but herself, least of all a random stranger, and her actions were clumsy with nerves.

"I didn't mean to break in," the girl murmured. "I was searching for somewhere else… got confused…"

"How did you break in?"

"The bots…" She pointed a trembling finger at one of them, which reached out to nudge her, the way the horses on Elena's farm did, long ago. "They're good like that…"

Elena inspected the gash on her leg. "I think this needs stitches," she said. "But I can't help there."

"I can do those," said the girl, and pointed to a bloodied pack in the corner. "Just pass me my bag."

Elena did so. The girl tore open the pack and bought out a small suture kit, together with a flask of something pungent and alcoholic. She doused half of it on her wound and took a

long sip of the rest, offering the remainder to Elena. Elena, knowing the dangers of drinking on an empty stomach, declined.

The girl shrugged and necked the rest, tossing the flask back into her bag. She laid out her equipment, tore a wider hole in the dark leg of her trousers, and started to sew.

Elena turned away, trying not to gag.

“Squeamish?” The girl laughed. “You look tougher.”

“Muscles don’t necessarily equal non-squeamish,” Elena said tartly. “Sorry.”

“You’re apologising to the person that broke into your workshop?”

“I…” Elena stalled, once more reminded of how ludicrous this all was. “I suppose so.”

“Ha! You’re odd. I like you.” The girl paused, hissing quietly. Elena didn’t want to look at what she was doing. “What’s your name?”

Elena paused for a moment, wondering if it was safe to share her name, if this wasn’t all some trap, a lead-up to thievery, before realising she had nothing in the world that could be taken from her as long as the girl didn’t know about the container under the workbench.

“Elena,” she said softly, “Hernandez.”

“Navarran?”

She nodded.

“Don’t get many Navarrans in Petragrad, especially not…”

Poor ones. If you could afford a ticket out of your city, you had money, or the government had paid your fare because they thought you had a skill you could offer. Mechanics, even good ones, were common enough in the clockwork cities. No Crown would buy them in.

“My father was a minor noble, a merchant,” Elena said. It had been a long time since anyone had asked for the story. It was almost a relief to tell it, the proof she came from somewhere. “A few of his shipments were destroyed by Spartan forces. We lost nearly everything. But then he met a wealthy woman who coveted his title. She married him and brought us back here. They made some bad investments together, then…” A shudder rocked through her, and she couldn’t quite find the words for the next part, even when she sensed the girl’s frown. “Your name?” she asked, filling the silence.

“Snowdrop,” replied the girl. “It’s a codename, obviously, but I’ve grown rather fond of it.”

“You’re a rebel, aren’t you?”

“What gave it away?”

A knock at the door cut through the conversation. Snowdrop stiffened, but Elena held up her hand. There was no urgency to the knock, as one might expect from the guards. It was someone more nervous and unsteady.

Snowdrop slid around the side of her workbench as Elena moved to the garage door, carefully rolling it upwards. A slight young man in green livery stood in the street, baring the bronze boar crest of the Marchioness. His eyes shifted from side to side as he held out a package, fingers trembling, and muttered a few words before scurrying off.

Elena placed the package on the worktop and closed the door again. “Quite the stir you caused today.”

“Good,” said Snowdrop, dragging herself back out, her leg still a pulsing mess. She propped herself back up against the wall and continued to sew. Elena averted her eyes again. “Nothing was ever accomplished without causing a stir.”

“And what’s that?”

“What?”

“I mean,” said Elena, struggling with her words, “what do you hope to accomplish?”

Snowdrop stopped sewing. “Me, or the rebellion?”

“Either. Both. I don’t know.”

“Most of the rebels would be happy if we just had more resources and freedoms for everyone. If things were a bit more equal.”

“And you?”

Snowdrop’s eyes—a startling blue—went as dark as storm clouds. “I want Mira’s head on a spike.”

Elena recoiled at the coldness in her tongue. She was no fan of Queen Mira's, but Elena had never wished death on anyone in her life, let alone the head of state. She wasn't sure she wanted to ask why Snowdrop felt this way, wasn't sure if she wanted to invite more poisonous words. Instead, she focused on the practicalities of such an act. "There's no heir. Who would rule instead?"

Snowdrop looked back at her leg. "No one, maybe. Or the people could elect someone. Anyone's better than Mira."

"We've elected people in the past," Elena recalled from history class. "They've been awful too."

"A bad choice is better than no choice at all."

Royalty had been obliterated in the time before; elected officials had been the norm. But many became corrupted by power. Elena couldn't quite remember when someone came up with the idea of reinstating royalty, raising someone for the role from birth in the hopes they'd do a better job, but it had been that way across the Mechanical Kingdoms for centuries now.

Frankly Elena wasn't sure there was much of a difference. Those in power would always misuse it.

She turned back to the package the servant had delivered and unwrapped it. It was a small cleaning automaton, useful for simple tasks only; dusting and sweeping. At a quick glance, it looked like something had got stuck in between the gears, choking several and forcing several others free of the

mechanism entirely. A few loose cogs rattled around the bottom of the paper.

She sighed, and set to work unscrewing.

Snowdrop looked up. “You’re a mechanic?”

“An engineer.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I invent things.”

She plucked a small metal object from a nearby shelf, crudely fashioned in the shape of a ballerina, with a tutu made of leftover springs. She wound the mechanism at the back and set it down on the floor, where it twirled and wheeled through the dust.

“Impressive,” Snowdrop remarked.

Elena shrugged, plucking the dancer back and returning it to its place on the shelf. “It’s just a trinket, a silly thing. There’s not much I can do with what I have here—”

“What would you do?” Snowdrop raised a curious brow. “If you had all the resources?”

A smile eased passed her lips, clockwork dreams whirring inside her. “Machines that could help people. Metal limbs or organs to replace those damaged or lost. Airships to command the skies. Things to refine the air, help us venture into the world once more. Something… something other than coal to power our cities.”

“What about weapons?”

Elena turned sharply towards her. *No, not weapons, not me. I won't help anyone be hurt, not ever—*

Another knock, louder than the nervous servant, reverberated across the rolling door. Snowdrop, tying up her leg, flinched, fingers itching towards a pistol at her belt.

Elena shook her head wildly, gesturing to the workbench. It was the only space big enough to hide her, even if…

The symbol. Her one act of defiance.

There was nothing for it. Snowdrop was hardly going to report her for it.

"Get in," she hissed softly.

The banging grew louder.

Snowdrop dragged herself across the floor and squeezed herself under the bench. Elena tossed a sheet over the top, shielding her from view, and went to answer it. She tried to ignore the clicking of Snowdrop's pistol. When had she even picked it up?

Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm—

She rolled up the door.

On the other side was a thin, dark-haired woman with a sour expression and cheeks red from running.

"Ivanka."

"Well," her stepsister pouted, "aren't you going to invite me in?"



Elena could count on one hand the number of times her older stepsister had visited her in the outer ring, and all three times it was because the Baroness needed something delivered and she couldn't find anyone else to do it. Even Mariah, who was a bit softer towards her, had only visited perhaps half a dozen times, bringing her parcels of food when she was forced to work late.

Ivanka had never visited of her own free will.

She marched into the workshop without waiting for an invitation, casting her eyes over the space and turning up her nose at the grease and dust. She dropped a basket on the workbench, and Elena waited for her to open it and shove another project in her face. Instead, she turned to her sharply.

"Close the door," she snapped. "I can scarcely breathe."

Elena closed the door and Ivanka removed the black silk mask from her face, standing underneath the rickety filter. The bots Snowdrop had brought with her all fell dutifully silent,

not that they'd look too out of place in the garage. Ivanka probably wouldn't even register them as odd.

"I've got you a job," Ivanka said.

Elena groaned. The last thing she needed was more work.

"Don't roll your eyes! You don't even know what it is yet."

"I know I don't have time to—"

Ivanka waved a long-fingered hand. "It's not for tonight. It's in a couple of days. A temporary job at the palace. It's just fixing up their automatons and making them all ship-shape for the queen's fancy ball. I mean, *peace conference*."

With the rumours of what Petragrad was hiding, Queen Mira was holding a conference at the palace with all the heads of state attending—an attempt to convince them that everything was fine, and that Petragrad, the fuel capital of the world, was as functional as ever.

Elena had been to the palace only once before, shortly after arriving in Petragrad. It was a magnificent, glittering jewel.

And the place where she'd witnessed the assassination of the king and his teenaged daughter.

Even now, Elena remembered the explosion, the running, the ringing in her ears. She remembered standing there, stunned, unable to move even as the room charged with movement. She remembered the shape of Mariah's mouth, screaming beside her, but the sound never reached her. Nothing did. Ivanka had seized their wrists and dragged them under the buffet table, and for the longest time the three of

them held each other, trembling as the room shook. Then sound had dribbled back, she heard her father's voice above the commotion, and the brief moment where the three of them had been something akin to sisters had shattered when he called Elena's name and not theirs.

Ivanka snapped her fingers. "Don't," she said shortly, as if she could peer straight into Elena's mind and didn't care for it. "It's a good job. Well-paid. Dependable."

"And I'll never see a penny of it."

Ivanka stilled, lips tightening. "I arranged the job, not Mother," she continued. "I convinced her that it was time for me to take on a share of the household tasks, ease the burden."

Elena waited for her to explain.

"She doesn't need to know how much they're paying you, all right? I'll pay you a sliver of it directly. You can do whatever you like with it. Buy yourself some food, some better tools. *A hairbrush.* I don't care."

In a different world, in another life, Elena would have argued for more than a sliver. It was *her* work, her time. She deserved it. She knew she did.

But what people deserved and what people got in this world did not always match up. Ivanka probably couldn't give her any more anyway, not with her mother watching. It was not worth the risk.

Slow but steady wins the race.

Elena opened her mouth to say something, but the words fell away from her.

“A ‘thank you’ will suffice,” said Ivanka.

“Thank you,” Elena muttered.

Ivanka straightened herself. “You’re welcome. You might even like it up there. Stars know you won’t be missed at home.”

I’m not missed anywhere.

Ivanka turned to leave.

“You could have told me this tomorrow,” Elena said.

Ivanka paused, pulling up her mask again. “Mariah overheard what Mother said to you,” she whispered, voice muffled. “She thought you might be hungry. Wanted to bring you something… Wasn’t going to have her walk down here on her own. ” She pointed to the basket on the table. “You say anything to Mother about me coming down here, or anyone, you’re dead, you hear?”

“I hear.”

“Good.”

She kicked the bottom of the door with her high-heeled boot, gesturing for Elena to release her. Elena did so, securing the door behind her.

Snowdrop tumbled out of the workbench shortly after the room fell quiet again, pulling herself to her feet. She leaned

heavily against the furniture, not putting any weight on her leg. “Your stepsister is a real piece of work.”

“Believe it or not, that was one of her better days.” She paused. “How did you know she was my stepsister?”

“An educated guess. The way she talked about ‘Mother’ but didn’t have your accent. Plus, you already told me your father remarried so…” She waited, looking at Elena intently. “How come your stepfamily is taking all your money?”

Elena sighed, rubbing her temples with her calloused fingers. “Officially, board and lodgings.”

“An unofficially?”

Elena stilled, wondering if the words would even leave her tongue, the ones that pulsed inside her but had never been spoken, never aloud. “I’m their prisoner,” she whispered. “Or their servant.”

Snowdrop squared up to her. “You have the Cross-Star carved beneath your bench.”

“So?”

“Symbols of worship are a crime in Petragrad.”

“I don’t see why—”

“You aren’t a prisoner,” Snowdrop said, blue eyes blazing, “you’re a rebel.”

Elena backed into a counter, sending a roll of coils springing. The automatons whizzed around the room, and it seemed for a moment like she was back in Navarra, a chorus

of insects screeching round her head. Only there was nothing comforting about the sound, more disconcerting, like a dream twisting into a nightmare.

“I’m not… I can’t…” Elena buckled. “I’m not one of you.”

Snowdrop backed off, slumping against the wall and slowly sliding back down again. The bots circled around her, crawling into her lap. One of the bird-like ones perched on her shoulder, nipping at her cheek with something like affection. They were remarkable creatures. Elena wanted to take them apart and explore their mechanisms. The thought calmed her, the soft ticking of their limbs like a heartbeat.

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” Snowdrop said, stroking the long jointed tail of the cat-like automaton. “I just… I don’t know. I wanted to say I trust you.”

“You want me to spy on the palace.”

“You’re sharp.”

“I wouldn’t pass up the opportunity if I were you,” Elena said under her breath. She ducked down to pick up the loose coils. “I understand that you’re desperate,” she continued. “That you’ll do anything to achieve your dream. But I have dreams too, and I can’t risk anything that would get in the way of them.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Snowdrop bow her head. “I get that,” she said, voice muggy. “And what are they? Your dreams?”

“Home,” Elena whispered. “Back to Navarra. I don’t care how long it takes. I’m going home.”

Snowdrop said nothing to this, and a few minutes passed by silently. “Can I sleep here?” she asked eventually. “There’s another place I could go, but I’m tired, and my leg’s hurting something fierce.”

“Sure,” said Elena. “I don’t have anything—”

“Don’t need anything,” Snowdrop said promptly. “Thanks, ‘Lena.”

It was probably just the exhaustion, but the way she said her name so casually reminded her of how long it had been since she heard it. When was the last time someone had called her by her name, let alone any sort of nickname? She’d had friends in Navarra, friends who called her that, but her childhood was a ghost to her.

Elena. Lena. That was me, once.

She chanced a look at the rusty cylinder where she kept her coin.

And one day, that will be me again.



The repair did not take as long as Elena initially feared, and within a couple of hours she was on her way back to the

Baroness' apartment. Snowdrop was fast asleep on the filthy floor, with nothing but her bag for a pillow and her cloak for a blanket. Elena left her a morsel of the food Ivanka had bought, just in case she was hungry when she woke.

Too exhausted to think much about the night's events, or the job Ivanka had lined up for her, she fell into her bed the second she returned, and sunk into a complete slumber.

She rose mid-morning, thin, watery light lying in bars across her bed, drifting from the high, narrow window above. Her room was a former pantry or utility, a space for extra things, rickety machines, brooms and mops. Her stepmother had "refurbished" Elena's old room and suggested she move into the cupboard while repairs were underway, but instead had created a new parlour. She'd insisted that Elena would be happier there, that she'd find it easier when she came in late, not having to drag dirt all over the rest of the place. The message, however, was clear, and it had not gone over her head.

You are not one of us. You are a tool. I will treat you as such.

To begin with, Elena had wondered why her stepmother seemed to hate her so, if it was misplaced resentment at her father, some twisted form of grief, or whether or not she truly did see her as another burden she was forced to contend with. She had since given up wondering, shelving all that despair and funnelling it into her work. It did no good to dwell on why others didn't like you.

"That's more their problem than yours," her mother told her once, when she'd complained some girls at school had taken to teasing her over the grease stains on her clothes. *"Not everyone is going to like you. But some will. Some will adore you. Hold onto them tightly, and don't worry about the rest."*

But now there was no one in the world who adored her. No one that even really liked her, although she supposed Mariah was kind to her the few times they were able to speak at all.

Maybe that was why Elena had let Snowdrop stay. She'd seen something of herself in the wounded girl and wanted to befriend her.

Silly. Foolish. Stupid.

"You are a good person, mija," her mother had continued, *"Kindness is forever undervalued. As long as you are kind, do not worry what others think of you. The right ones will find you."*

She'd been right, of course. She'd found good friends easily enough. Three of them. Clara, Jane, Maribel. They had been friends throughout school, praising her inventions, sticking up for her when others dared to comment, braiding each other's hair for balls and parties. All three had come to the station to see her off on her journey, and cried beautifully.

They wrote to her every week, telling her of everything that was happening back home, of new festivals and friends, of things that made her homesick and laugh in the same breath.

Then when the money started running out, her stepmother said they didn't have the funds for frivolous things like stamps. Her father, when he was alive, argued, and they came to the compromise of sending one letter per month. Elena poured her heart into that singular letter, writing half a book of her daily life, with sections for each friend. But when their fortunes worsened, she found she had less to say, and after her father passed…

Dear Clara, Maribel and Jane. Nothing ever changes here. I feel scooped out and hollowed, like my father took half of me with him to the grave. I am a ghost inside a sack of meat, and nothing more. I am becoming clockwork, and there is no one to wind me up.

She would not have written even if her stepmother had told her she could. They wrote back, of course. For months, a year, even. But finally, the letters had stopped.

Elena had been forgotten.

She had enough in her little cache to purchase a few stamps now, and sometimes her fingers itched to write to them, but it had been too long now, and every purchase she made was another day she'd have to spend in Petragrad.

Maybe she'd explain one day, in person.

Elena dressed quickly that morning, pulling on high-waisted brown trousers, her only pair of boots, a shirt which had once been white and a worn bodice, the pattern now faded beyond recognition. She didn't bother running a brush through her hair or even glancing at the mirror as she made her escape, too

ashamed of what she'd see there. She grabbed a hunk of bread, a slice of cheese, and a wilted apple before hurrying out. She did not want to meet her stepmother on the way, already late to meet the Marchioness' servant.

He was waiting outside when she arrived. Elena spoke to him loudly, hoping to give Snowdrop the head's up if she was waiting inside. She opened the door, peering into the gloom. It was dark, Snowdrop's previous spot deserted.

She fetched the package and sent the servant on his way. He looked only too happy to leave, not even muttering a thanks as he hurried off. Elena closed the door behind him and hurried over to the workbench where she assumed Snowdrop would be hiding.

It was empty.

Elena's stomach dropped. Had she left already, without a word of goodbye? She knew it shouldn't matter, that she shouldn't care about this girl that she'd only just met. And maybe she didn't. Maybe she just cared about being left behind again, forgotten.

Something clanged behind her, and she swivelled sharply. Five of the automatons came crawling towards her, two winding round her legs. It seemed unlikely that Snowdrop had left them behind.

The door shifted, and rolled upwards slowly. Snowdrop stood behind it with the remaining two bots, supporting herself with a bit of piping she must have found at the back of Elena's workshop.

“Morning,” she said stiffly, limping in.

“I thought you might have left.”

Snowdrop groaned. “On this leg? No chance. Barely got to the place I was trying to reach last night.”

“Where was that?”

“A garage a couple of streets away. One of my buddies was there. Looks like we all escaped relatively unscathed. A couple of them were out searching for me.”

“You’re very trusting, telling me all this.”

“What are you going to do, Navarra? Report me with that symbol under your desk?”

Elena flinched.

“Relax, I’m teasing.”

“I am not used to being teased,” Elena said quietly. When people made threats around her, they tended not to be empty.

Snowdrop shrugged, half-apologetically, and hobbled towards a seat in the corner, grunting with every step until she lowered herself down and could stretch out. “I should be tougher than this.”

“Your leg was pretty sliced up,” Elena offered. “Not sure you can heal that with willpower alone.”

“You know *nothing* about me.”

“Well, we did just meet last night. I don’t even know your real name.”

Snowdrop stilled. “I don’t use it anymore,” she said. “It’s of no use to anyone.”

While she knew that Snowdrop was not alone in the world, Elena wondered what had happened in her past that this old name had been discarded, and whether it was by choice or necessity.

“No one much uses my name any more, either.”

“You got another one?”

“Just Elena.”

Snowdrop paused. “What do your stepfamily call you?”

“They don’t.”

Snowdrop swallowed, opening her mouth, before the cat-like bot leapt into her lap. The others circled round her, the bird perched on her shoulder.

“Your bots are remarkable.”

“Thank you,” said Snowdrop. “Although I didn’t make them. Elena, meet Walkie, Talkie, Clickety, Clackety, Rusty, Bang Bang and Wheels.”

“Creative.”

Snowdrop snorted. “The kids named them.”

“Kids? You have kids in the Outlands?”

“A few. It’s rough out there, but it’s not as bad as you think.”

The Outlands outside the domed city were supposed to be brutal and inhospitable, the rebels living in some dark, underground fortress. It did not sound like a nice place to grow up.

“Tell me about it,” Elena asked.

“Oh no, girl, I’m not spilling *every* last secret we have.”

Elena smiled. “Fair enough.” A pause spread between the two of them, not uneasy. “Why did you come back here if your friend was at your safehouse?”

“Well, I had to come back for these little dudes,” she said. “Plus, it seemed rude to go without thanking you.”

“Thank you.”

“For thanking you?”

“For coming back.”

Snowdrop glanced down. “Sure,” she said. “So, I’m not going to be able to leave the city on this leg for a bit. I’m going to head back to my place after I’ve rested, but I’m going to be around for a few days, at least.”

“All right.”

“If you hear anything in the palace—”

Elena stiffened. “Please don’t ask me to do that again.”

“Right.” Snowdrop stood up again. “I should—”

“You don’t have to leave,” Elena said swiftly. “Stay. Honestly. I’d quite like the company.”

Snowdrop didn’t volunteer a lot of information about herself, so Elena talked instead, first about what she was doing —how she was fixing things and how the machines just sort of spoke to her—and then about other things. The hot bun stall on the corner of her road, Grandma’s stories, the colour of Navarran skies.

Snowdrop listened attentively, asking her the occasional question, her eyes lit up in enthusiastic contemplation. At lunchtime, she took a couple of stale bread rolls and a can of soup out of her bag, which they shared together on the dusty floor.

Snowdrop didn’t leave until the end of the day, and she didn’t mention the palace job again at all, except to wish her luck the following day.

Elena prayed she would not need it.



Early mornings rarely hurt, and Elena had found from experience it was better to be out of the way before the Baroness awoke if ever it were possible. She grabbed a bite to eat before the rest of the apartment woke, gave herself a quick wash, and pulled on the least grimy of her clothes. A foolish quest, of course. She’d be dirty within the first hour. But it rarely hurt to make a good first impression, either.

It took an hour to get through security before she was put to work. An hour of her fingerprints being taken, her appearance documented, and an ID tag produced that allowed her access only to the workshops and the servants' quarters. She was searched upon entrance, although she couldn't help but feel the job was a little lazy in that regard. She wasn't permitted to bring any of her own tools with her, but they didn't check equipment thoroughly either.

I could have a smoke bomb hidden inside that wrench, she thought to herself. *You could have set it off yourself with that clumsy handling. Excellent distraction.*

She squashed down her traitorous thoughts. She'd never given any thought to designing weapons before, even if a smoke bomb was at the lesser end of the scale.

A guard escorted her to the workshops. They were adjacent to the palace, connected by a thin corridor not far from the kitchens and the rest of the servants' quarters. Elena flinched as they passed through the gardens, her eyes settling, only briefly, on the balcony jutting out over the lawns. The balcony where the bomb that killed the king and princess went off, now immaculately restored.

Steel and stone and bronze could be easily replaced. Flesh and lives were not so easily stitched back together. Perhaps that's why she liked metal so much. It was something that couldn't die that she could coax into something like life.

The guard coughed.

"Sorry," Elena said. "Lost in thought."

“It is best not to loiter,” the guard said stiffly. “Here.”

They progressed into the palace, past outposts and gates and doors, until they arrived at the workshops. Elena recognised the smell immediately, warm oil and hot steel, sawdust and pine. There were several rooms, some with glass doors, displaying automatons in the shape of people with beautiful painted faces and limbs of clockwork so intricate it almost looked like lace.

She was not permitted to stare. “This is your station,” said the guard, opening a door and gesturing to a workbench at the back. “You are to arrive at the main gates at eight-thirty, to begin work at nine. Lunch is one hour. Refreshments will be provided. You are not to leave this room for anything other than rest breaks. The facilities are across the hall. You may leave when your supervisor says so. She’ll be along at some point today. Do you have everything you need?”

Elena looked down at her workbench, admiring the immaculate tools and the small roving cleaning bot with a busted pivot that had already been placed there for her inspection.

“Yes,” she said. “I do. Thank you.”

The guard said nothing more, closing the door behind him and leaving Elena to it. There were five other benches in the room, three currently occupied. Not one of the other mechanics raised their heads in greeting, or said anything to Elena at all. No matter, it was what she was used to. And she was here to work, after all.

The supervisor came around an hour later to check their progress. It was impossible to tell whether or not she approved of Elena's work.

"There's no need to polish it," she snipped. "The other servants will do that."

"Right."

"Collect another from the storeroom when you've finished with this one."

"Of course."

Elena worked diligently all day, fishing out loose gears, replacing crooked cogs, oiling wheels and fixing springs. She lost count of the number of jobs she completed.

One by one, the other mechanics left, but the supervisor disappeared towards the end of the day, and Elena was in no mood to go home. There was nothing at home to tempt her, nothing that could even be called 'home' at all. She'd stay as long as she could. It was comfortable here, the filters were efficient, she liked the dull monotony of the work, and every so often, a servant came from the kitchens offering refreshments. Fresh water, tea, juice, coffee, sandwiches and fruits, cakes and other confectionery. She hadn't eaten so well in years, and had wrapped up all the leftovers to take home with her. She hoped they wouldn't be confiscated at the gates.

The door opened. Elena looked up from her bench, certain it was the supervisor come to relieve her, but instead found

herself face-to-face with a nervous-looking bespectacled man in a white coat.

“Oh, thank the stars!” he said. “The Dome’s delivered! There’s someone still here.”

“Can I help you at all?”

“Um, oh, I hope so…” He closed the door behind him, looking around carefully, and held out a long, thin package. “I’ve had a bit of an accident with this…”

Curious, Elena unwrapped it. It was a mechanical arm. Nothing pretty like the ones attached to the dolls she’d witnessed earlier. A big, bronze creation, almost too big for anything of average human size. A prosthetic? The wearer must have been enormous.

“Can you fix it?” the man asked.

Elena gave it a quick once-over. It was disjointed at the wrist, a few wires burned, a couple of missing pieces of plating. She gave it a shake; something rattled inside.

“Well?” he asked, eyes trembling apprehensively.

“I’ve yet to find anything I couldn’t fix,” Elena said, not tearing her eyes off it. “When do you need it by?”

“Um, well, tonight.”

Elena winced.

“Please,” the man said quickly. “Look, I can pay you extra. Three gold coins—”

Elena stalled. That was more than all the money in her escape canister. Was he serious? He certainly looked it.

“This isn’t illegal, is it?” she asked hesitantly.

“Oh no, not at all. Crown-sanctioned work, I promise. Just needs to be… hush-hush. Discreet. My job will be on the line if I don’t have it fixed immediately—”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll do it. Give me at least two hours.”



Phillippe Edwarde Alexander II, the Crown Prince of Toulouse, (known to his family as Pip) was bored.

He was bored of stuffy council meetings and politicians and nobles looking to gain favour. He was bored of everyone skirting around the recent attacks, and the rumours circling about Petragrad. He was bored of no one saying what they meant.

Mostly, he was just bored.

"It's important to pay attention in the meetings," his assistant, Susan, reminded him constantly. "Don't think I didn't notice you almost dozing off in that last one."

"Every single one is *exactly the same, Susan*! Sparta is awful. Look what they're doing. Here's what we're doing. Such a good job. More money, please."

"Ah, so you *were* paying attention."

"Well, at least for the first three."

Susan narrowed her grey eyes at him and clapped him round the back of her head with her clipboard. She was a woman composed entirely of sharp edges and neutral colours, permanently dressed in the silver robes of the Toulousian council, her grey-brown hair scraped into a bun. She had been a fixture in the palace for as long as Pip could remember, as much a part of it as the galleries dedicated to his ancestors. Even here, in Petragrad, she looked like she belonged.

Here, Pip was the one out of his element, surrounded by people he didn't know, in a land he wasn't familiar with and hadn't even been permitted to see. He and the rest of the ambassadors from the other kingdoms had been restricted to the palace grounds since the moment they arrived a week ago.

"For your protection," the queen's advisor had explained.

Pip wasn't so sure. Things were a little more open in Toulouse. He frequently walked amongst the people of the city, learning about them and their lives, preparing to serve them. Here, the palace couldn't be further from the rest of the mechanical metropolis, hidden behind an ocean of clouds.

"Petragrad is the largest of all the cities," his old tutor had told him. *"With the tallest dome."*

The Dome was tall to accommodate the ridiculous height of the palace. A matter of pride, yet without anything to truly be proud of. How did the beauty of a building tell you anything about the land itself?

Pip massaged the back of his head, reeling from Susan's admonishment. "Why do I tolerate you?"

“Because I am remarkably good at my job,” she said primly, scanning something on her board. “And I’ve worked for your family for so long now it would really be awkward to fire me.”

“It’s tempting at times.”

“Be like firing an aunt—”

“You are not my aunt, Susan—”

“A trusted friend—”

“Friend is a strong word…”

“You wound me.”

Pip sighed, more loudly than he meant to. “I’m going for a walk.”

“You have croquet on the lawns at midday.”

Pip swallowed his displeasure. “I won’t be late.”

She scribbled something down on her clipboard, ignoring Pip’s scowl—he could tell by the wry smile on her face she’d seen it.

“I’ll see you then,” he said tartly, and swept out of the room.

He was glad she hadn’t insisted on taking an escort. He was scarcely allowed anywhere in the grounds of the Toulousian Palace without a guard, or several. Admittedly, the Grand Palace was a lot easier to access than the Imperial one, which had only the elevators, as far as he could tell. Security was restrictive at the moment, likely because they’d had a break-in three months ago. The palace had made no official statement, of course, but Pip had heard the whispers. A disgraced

scientist and a former soldier. They'd stolen something from the labs, although *what* Pip had no idea, and were rumoured to be working with Sparta. Or the rebels.

He really wasn't sure what to believe, only that it was useful to listen.

He wandered through the manicured lawns, passed flocks of strutting peacocks, perfectly-cut ponds, and sculpted hedges. He'd explored the grounds extensively within the first couple of days, but he still found he was surprised by some new part of it every now and again—a hidden alcove, a pretty fountain, a different flower bed. Still, he never found what he was looking for: a little patch of wildness. In Toulouse, at the edge of the grounds, was a small garden accessed through a tiny door and hidden by a thick hedge. Behind it was a crumbled old stone building, little more than a heap of rock, surrounded by forget-me-nots and wild roses. It was Pip's favourite place in the entire world, and a favourite haunt of his grandma, the Dowager. She was as sharp as the thorns on the roses, her eyes the pale steely-blue of the flowers.

But nothing wild existed in the Imperial Palace. It was as perfect as clockwork, and as polished as silver.

Pip sighed with frustration, turning the corner into the maze, determined to get lost. He managed about ten minutes before finding himself at a dead end—

Occupied by Prince Nero and one of the palace guards, missing half of her uniform.

"Oh," he said shortly, before he could stop himself.

Nero looked up from the guard's neck, black eyes gleaming. "Pip!"

At twenty-three, Prince Nero was older than Pip by two years and at least twice as stylishly dressed. Pip wore his clothes well, and he knew he looked fine in them, but Nero's clothes always seemed as much a part of him as his walk or his black, tightly-curled hair, cropped close to his scalp. Today, he was wearing a form-fitting ensemble of charcoal and silver, the bodice of his corset-jacket decorated with thorns and stags. The silk clung to his form (distinctly broader and yet somehow more elegant than Pip's) like a second skin.

Nero was Firenzian, and bore the deep, warm brown skin of so many of them, and eyes like dark coals. Despite hailing from Firenze, he had half grown up in Petragrad, as a distant cousin of the Queen's. Rumours had it that they'd grown into something more over the years, but Pip had never inquired as to the truth of them. It was rude, and he wasn't all that curious.

Nero abandoned the guard—hastily pulling her clothes back on—and raised an arm to drape around Pip's shoulder.

"Pip!" he hooted again, drawing him into something almost like a hug. "Good to see you, old boy."

"You saw me in the council meeting this morning."

"Pfft, council meetings don't count. No one is ever themselves in them."

It was an oddly astute observation from Nero, but Pip didn't like it. He shrugged off Nero's arm.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Nero raised a dark brow, eyes darting to the guard now sliding out of the maze. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Right. Silly question.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “She didn’t have to go. I would have left.”

He waved a hand. “Alas, the sport was at its best.”

A voice sounded from over the hedge. “Screw you, Prince!”

“I still adore you, Natasha!”

“It’s Natalya!”

“A thousand apologies.” He waited a few more minutes before turning once more to Pip, as if trying to work out if she was out of earshot. “Women, am I right?”

“I feel the problem in that scenario was probably you.”

Nero laughed. “Oh, almost certainly.”

A hard voice burned through the crisp dawn air. “Nero! Where are you?”

Nero froze, laughter vanishing. “Shit,” he whispered, eyes darting about.

Pip fought back a grin. He knew the voice well; Nero’s younger sister, Lucia.

“I know you’re there, Nero!”

They were backed into a dead end. Pip could see Nero’s mind whirring, trying to calculate where her voice was coming

from, if she was on the right path or if he could sneak by her. He floundered like a fawn.

Pip actually knew Lucia better than he did her brother. A few summers ago, when he was visiting Firenze with his father, he and Lucia had tried their hand at courting one another. It was common, almost expected, for the young royals to date during the weeks when they would gather, trying to arrange a match for themselves before their parents could suggest one. That summer, it seemed like everyone had partnered off, and he and Lucia had shifted together almost by accident.

“I suppose we might as well,” she’d suggested one afternoon. “It would give us something to do, at least, and your company is quite pleasing.”

It was high praise from Lucia, and he took it, but the relationship had come to an abrupt halt after an awkward coupling on the final night, wherein Lucia had told him immediately afterwards that she preferred the company of women.

It was not exactly the ego-boosting first time he’d hoped for.

Nevertheless, after a brief period of awkwardness, they’d remained friends over the years, occasionally exchanging letters—which was more than Pip could say about Nero.

“There you are!”

Lucia entered the glade in a swish of golden skirts. She had generous curves and the same warm brown skin as her brother,

though her hair was several shades lighter, a thousand tight spirals of amber, chestnut, mahogany, piled on top of her head and studded with hairpins shaped like suns. She had the appearance of an autumn forest at dawn, although her expression was as frosty as ever.

One of Pip's cousins, the Marquis of Belcover, long fancied himself a poet. He'd described her as "sunlight given shape" and whilst Pip could see it in her figure and costume, it was devoid in her countenance; that, or the Marquis had forgotten quite how harsh sunlight could be.

Nero steeled himself. "Lucia, darling sister, you look as wonderful as ever—"

"Spare me," she snapped. "Why did I pass a half-dressed guard on my way here?"

"Perhaps she slipped and—"

She groaned. "Nero, I don't object to the immorality of your life, merely it's messiness."

Nero pouted. "I'm not messy."

"Many a woman would disagree. Which reminds me; the Queen wishes to see you."

At this, Nero froze. It was different from his reaction to Lucia's appearance, half put on. This pause was harder, sharper, ice to a flake of frost. "Well," he said, with a too-broad smile, "I suppose I best not keep her waiting."

He smoothed down his corset-jacket and strode off down the path.

Lucia turned to Pip, her sharpness softening. “Croquet’s about to start soon. Shall we walk there together?”

“Only if it sets off a scandal,” Pip declared, offering Lucia his arm.

She smiled, tucking her hand under his arm, and gathering her skirts with the other. Her movements were like water, controlled and elegant, but with a power to them, too. Pip had no doubt she could crush most beneath her.

“How are you, Pip?” Lucia asked, with the gentleness of a stream. “I haven’t spoken to you in a while. Is your father—”

“My father is fine,” he reported. *Or at least, no worse.*

Lucia nodded. “I appreciate that you may wish to keep a brave face in front of the others, that you may even have been advised to, but… I wouldn’t speak to anyone else, if you needed a confidante. That is all.”

Pip could think of nothing to say to that. The truth of the matter was he wished there was someone he could speak to, someone other than Susan, who might not know what to say or offer purely practical advice. But it could not be Lucia. He wanted to believe her when she said she would keep his secret —she had given him no reason to think she was untrustworthy —but it was simply not a risk he could take.

Besides, it might be nothing. It was best not to fret until they knew what.

Lucia switched topics, remarking on latest gossip instead, who was rumoured to be sleeping with who, a new ball gown

she'd ordered, what was reported to be on the menu for dinner. She stayed away from politics or anything heavy, even though she had more of a mind for those things than her brother.

It was a bright day, but a cloud lodged itself in Pip's chest, and no amount of idle chatter and croquet on the lawns could remove it.

Lunch was quiet, Nero still missing and Lucia engaged in conversation with the Duchess of Ishmael. He chatted amongst the other young nobles instead, retired to his chambers for a much-needed siesta, and was woken mid-afternoon by Susan who needed his attention on some paperwork.

Pip groaned. "I *despise* paperwork."

"It makes the world go round."

"First rule I'm going to instigate when I become king? Dispense of the whole blasted business."

"Good luck issuing laws without *paper,*" Susan admonished, shaking her head. "Oh, and the Duke of Veronia has requested you join him for a drink before dinner."

"What does he want?"

"No doubt to secretly interrogate you about your father's health."

The cloud in Pip's chest grew larger. "His niece already asked, and she's a damn sight prettier than he is."

"What did you tell her?"

"I did not reply."

Susan sighed. “So they all know, then.”

Pip tightened his jaw. “I don’t suppose we could just tell them, could we?”

“I would advise against it. People will look for any weakness.”

“These people are our friends—”

“They *were* your friends,” she told him. “When you were a child. Now some will be your allies, if not your enemies, and they may have yet to decide which.”

Pip nodded, hating the truth of her words. He liked people; he hated politics. And he hated not knowing who to trust, and hiding a part of himself, and that the political turmoil was considered so volatile at the moment that they couldn’t release the truth of the king’s ill health.

In typical Toulousian fashion, his father had put on a stiff upper lip, and refused to acknowledge that it was anything more than a cold, even when it was decided that Pip would travel in his stead.

“You’ll be fine, son,” he’d announced, patting his shoulder. “You’ve been training for this your entire life.”

“I don’t want to be king,” Pip had blurted, when what he’d actually meant was *I don’t want to be king right now.*

The king’s smile hardened, and he lowered his voice to a whisper. “Neither did I, my boy, but it was my duty. And hopefully I’ve not done too bad a job. I’ve faith that you won’t, either, when it comes to it.”

It was as close as they came to goodbye.

Pip ran his hands through his hair at the memory as Susan helped him dress for dinner, mentally preparing himself to fob off the duke with excuses and divert the conversation to anything else.

“Make sure he has a second whiskey,” Susan advised. “He’s no tolerance for the stuff and will soon forget everything he wanted to ask you.”

“Excellent advice.”

“Have I ever given you another kind?” She smoothed down his clothes. “Off you go.”

Susan’s advice did the trick. Whenever the Duke steered the conversation towards the Toulousian king, Pip merely offered to top up his glass. The audience was over before he knew it, and the two were summoned to dinner.

He was pleased to find himself sat next to Lucia, and the absence of Queen Mira at the table lightened the atmosphere considerably.

Nero was absent, too.

“Do you think there’s any truth to the rumours about him and Mira?” he asked her, when the meal began without them.

Lucia shrugged, somehow making even that look elegant. “I have noticed the way she looks at him, and believe there may be some attraction on her part, but it is unlike Nero not to speak of his conquests. Besides, she doesn’t seem bothered by his other… pursuits.”

Pip was inclined to agree. It must just be a rumour.

And yet, the way Nero had reacted to her summons in the garden… something was going on between them, surely, romantic or otherwise.

“She’s your cousin, isn’t she?” he asked instead. “Distantly.”

The Queen, with her pale, white beauty, like a polished icicle, was as different as could be from the fire and warmth of the Firenzians.

“By marriage, at least,” Lucia responded. “The first one.”

Pip frowned, silently admonishing himself for his lack of knowledge in that department, and making a mental note to ask Susan to school him in the branches of the royal family tree later. “She was married before?”

Lucia nodded. “To our second cousin, Duke of Ferdinand. Nice chap. Good with kids.”

“What happened?”

“He died. Hunting accident, I think. She cried beautifully at the funeral.” There was a gleam in her eyes that didn’t quite match her words.

“What is it?” Pip prompted.

“Well, she’s something of a black widow, isn’t she? Two husbands dying in their prime.”

“You can’t possibly think she had anything to with—”

“Hmm, maybe not the king, although I’ve heard the rumours, but the first one…”

Pip had heard the rumours too, but he didn’t like to give weight to them. The palace said that the rebellion had killed the king, but he remembered his parents discussing it in hushed voices. Spartan spies, or something, had been discovered in the palace at the same time, and his father couldn’t work out for the life of him why the palace hadn’t reported that.

“Unless Sparta was in league with the rebels,” his mother had responded. “But I can’t see why that would be the case.”

Lucia smiled, shaking her head. “We ought to stop gossiping so. The walls have ears, dear Pip. I would hate to invite a similar accident…”

Pip shivered, remembering once more why they would never have worked even if Lucia had been inclined towards men, and hoping someone suggested something light to pass the rest of the evening with. A game, a dance, a distraction. Something.

The evening wore on; a few guests retired. Mira remained absent, as did General Bestiel—her right hand man—as well as Nero and several of the court officials. That lent less credence to the idea that Mira and Nero were having an affair, but what on earth could they be discussing? Nero’s mother, reigning monarch of Firenze, was in attendance. Surely Mira would go to her for political matters?

Pip tried to forget it, but his mind was still stuck on Lucia's words, the chill that came with them. He couldn't dispel them, couldn't shake it. He was certain he'd never be able to sleep at this rate.

It was getting late. Deciding that a little walk and some quiet would do him good, Pip slipped away from the rest of the party and headed towards the kitchens. He could summon the staff at the ring of a bell, of course, but he fancied the exercise and didn't want to disturb anyone if they were busy.

A servant turned the corner and barreled into him, spilling the glasses on the tray she was carrying. Pip managed to grab most of them before they fell, covering himself with wine in the process.

"Your Highness!" she shrieked. "I'm so, so sorry—"

"It's fine, it's absolutely fine," he assured her, taking the tray from her grip and placing it on a nearby table. "Although I daresay laundry might be a little annoyed with us—"

"Let me fetch you another jacket, Your Highness—"

"It's quite all right. You have another job to do. The laundry is right along here, is it not? I'll save you a journey."

Tears sprang to the girl's eyes, and he wondered what reception she usually received for a mishap. She hadn't even done anything wrong. "If you're sure—"

"For certain. Please. Do not worry yourself. I shouldn't really be down here anyway. It was entirely my fault."

The girl muttered a thanks and dipped back into the kitchen. Pip turned towards the laundry room, stripping off the stained jacket and depositing it in one of the labelled baskets. He looked for something else to wear in the meantime—the wine had gone straight through to his shirt—but couldn't find anything clean except for a servant's livery.

Pip pulled it on. It was a good fit.

A part of him was tempted to see if it would get him all the way down the lifts and into the city, but he thought that might be pushing his luck. Still, the uniform offered him a little more freedom than he'd had since his arrival. What would he like to see that he hadn't been shown?

He'd been shown galleries and gardens, research wings and barracks. He'd been treated to displays of manoeuvres and fine pageantry. He hadn't seen any real craftsmanship, though, any real beauty.

The workshops.

Pip had always admired the skill of the clockwork creations, in the way others ogled art in a gallery. He had no head for gears, no clue as to their inner workings, but marvelled at them nonetheless.

It couldn't hurt to take a look, could it? All the workers would have left by now. He'd hardly be disturbing anyone.

It was a quiet rebellion, but he'd take it, setting off before he could think the better of it. He passed a couple of people on

his way towards them, but not one of them even looked at him, like the uniform rendered him somehow invisible.

The workshops were easy to locate even when silent, as every door was labelled. He pushed open the door to *Workshop 1* and stepped inside, welcomed immediately by the smell of sawdust, bronze and grease. His eyes glazed over the clockwork automatons propped at the side of the room, painted faces askew, metallic guts on display, beautiful in their intricacy. He took a moment to admire the craftsmanship, and the detail on the masks that acted as their faces.

At the workbench at the furthest end of the room was a solitary mechanic, hunched over her work. Pip rushed an apology, only to realise that the mechanic wasn't slumped, she was sleeping.

It was an odd place for a nap, and not *that* late. Had she hurt herself? Fallen ill?

Pip crept closer. She was a young woman, about his age, or at least he thought so, underneath all the dirt. She had strong, muscular arms and skin that glowed brownish-gold in the light of the lamps. Her hair was the colour of earth and fell around her cheeks in rough waves.

She breathed evenly into the dust of the desk, fingers still clasped around a wrench.

Pip shook her arm gently, slightly concerned about her jerking awake and flinging the wrench in his direction. He did not want to explain to Susan why he had a bruise on his forehead.

“Hello?” he said softly. “Are you all right?”



THE FIRST MEETING

Elena woke to someone shaking her arm gently.

"I say, are you quite all right? It's an odd place for a nap."

Elena blinked wearily. Beside her was a clean-shaven man in the white and gold livery of the serving staff. His appearance was *pristine.* His fair, sandy hair was perfectly cropped around the back and sides, leaving a tumble of curls at the top. His eyes reminded her of the fields of Navarra, a deep, hazy green beneath a glistening sun. Many of the servants in the palace were automatons, it made sense that the organic ones they employed were astonishingly flawless.

"I'm fine," she murmured, wishing her mouth didn't feel like she'd been swallowing honey, "just dozed off while working."

The man smiled at her, soft but dazzling. "You must have been working hard. It's not that late. Would you like an escort to the elevators?"

Elena looked down at the arm. She still had another thirty minutes of work on it, minimum. “No, I need to finish this.”

“Is there anything I can do to assist?”

Elena blinked at him, certain she’d misheard. “No, thank you. I’m fine.” As she spoke, her stomach growled loudly. It had been a long time since lunch.

The man stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

Elena doubted he would be, especially as the minutes trickled by. He was probably embarrassed to discover her napping, and cared little for the silly sounds her stomach was making. He might even be reporting her for sleeping on the job. He was wearing some kind of uniform, wasn’t he? She hadn’t been paying much attention, too distracted by rousing and the startling quality of his face.

Don’t think about his face, she warned herself. *Don’t you dare. You don’t need any distractions, especially from someone who is probably reporting you!*

She focused her attention on fixing the arm, determined that they wouldn’t be allowed to dismiss her if she’d finished it by the time she was found.

Would they be able to dismiss her for this anyway? The scientist had promised her cash in hand.

Wait, the scientist had asked her to keep this secret. Had she just exposed him to the servant? That would terrible, awful—

The door clicked open again before she could spiral too much, and in walked the same man as before, now carrying a

tray of tea and cake.

“You seemed hungry,” he said, beaming in the same manner a dog might. “I wasn’t sure what you liked, but cake is usually a fairly safe bet, and a pot of jolly decent tea. I brewed it myself. In Toulouse we say there’s little that can’t be improved with a spot of tea—”

“You’re Toulousian?” She sat up.

“Ah, yes,” he said briskly. “What of it?”

“You don’t have an accent.”

Elena had heard the accent before, soft and lilting. This chap was more polished and clipped. Even his actions of pouring the tea seemed elegant, his fingers long and graceful. No scars or blemishes, no dirt.

“Are you one of Toulousian servants? Did you come over with the Prince?” The valets and upper staff might be required to adopt the formal speech of the royal family, although it seemed odd that they’d put him to work handing out tea to the rest of the staff.

He handed her a cup of tea. “That would make sense, wouldn’t it?” he said, fingers brushing his uniform. He looked up at her, summoning a smile. “I’m Pip.”

Elena sipped her tea. It was strong and sweet. “Elena.”

“Navarran?”

She nodded. “I came here six years ago.”

“Your accent is still strong.”

She prickled. “It is.”

“I didn’t mean that disrespectfully,” he said hurriedly. “Merely an observation. It’s—I mean, it’s lovely. Always liked the Navarran accent.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Yes, visiting with…”

He must have gone there on a royal visit, his memories of it more recent that hers. Pip seemed to sense something amiss. “It’s a beautiful place,” he added.

“I hope to return to it someday.”

Pip said nothing to that. She set down her tea, gobbled the cake, and returned to her assignment. She expected him to quietly shirk away, never to be seen again, but he didn’t, instead hovering at the side of the room. Not close enough to be a nuisance, but near enough for company.

“I’ve always enjoyed watching skilled people work,” he admitted. “Never much minded what they were doing. Tending cattle, painting, fixing things… all interesting, all admirable.”

Elena knew she should ignore him, knew she should just focus on her work, but aside from her two or three conversations with Snowdrop, she’d had no one talk to her like this for years. Like they cared about what she said next.

She slid a new gear into place and tested the rest of the mechanism by touch alone, raising her eyes to meet his. “And you?” she asked. “You must have a skill.”

He raised his cup. “Aside from my excellent tea-making skills and witty conversation? I’m afraid I draw rather lacking in that department.”

Elena smiled, taking another sip. “Well, the tea is good, I grant you.”

“And the conversation?”

“Still evaluating it.”

He laughed, short and warm, and fell silent for a moment as he drank his tea. “Any other skills you have, besides fixing things?”

Elena paused, wiping her hair back from her face. Once upon a time, she’d been skilled in all manner of courtly pursuits, but it had been so long since she’d played a piano her fingers would crack against the keys. She’d be better at taking it apart.

And she had danced, too, once upon a time, lost herself to music.

But she didn’t want to tell this stranger that, didn’t want to open the lid on the sad little girl who still longed for a ball.

“Inventing them,” she said instead.

“Come again?”

“I like inventing things. Not just fixing them. I’m an engineer.”

Pip regarded her carefully over the rim of his cup. “What sort of things?”

“Well, back on the family farm it was stuff to help plant or harvest, to chop wood, to—” She paused, remembering how none of those things had been enough to save the farm when the investments fell through, how her father had been forced to sell them before giving up entirely. “These days it’s more little toys and trinkets. The odd cleaning bot.”

“And if you had the time or money to create anything?”

Elena smiled, remembering Snowdrop asking her the same question. It hadn’t warmed her as much as when Pip asked, though.

“Something to fix the world,” she told him, “and then travel it.”

Pip stared at her solidly for a long moment, as if she’d suddenly transformed into something else.

“What?” she prompted. “Do I have cake on my face?” She patted her cheeks.

Pip smiled. “No, you’re crumb-free, I’m happy to report.”

“Then—”

“It’s just an admirable goal, that’s all.”

She shook her head. “It’s just a dream.”

“Only if you let it be.” He regarded her carefully for another moment. “Have you finished with that arm?”

“Almost, why?”

“I have something to show you when you’re done. Here, let me clean up and take the tray back to the kitchen, give you a

moment to work in peace—”

“That’s—” she started, stopping as he reached across to grab her empty plate, the back of his arm brushing over her exposed wrist. “Thank you,” she finished, his eyes startlingly close.

He frowned. “For bothering you?”

“Mostly for the cake and tea, but yes, also for that.”

“You like being bothered?”

I like not being alone. “By some people.”

His lips twitched. “Careful, Elena. I’ll be bothering you every night now.”

“Well, if you find yourself bored…”

His gaze twinkled. “I may just take you up on that.” He placed everything back on the tray, just as neatly as it had arrived. “I’ll be back momentarily.”

Elena shifted her focus back to her work as he vanished, intent on finishing before he returned. Her heart felt slightly odd in her chest, like a cog with a bent tooth, juddering and jarring. She decided it was probably the heat of the workshop, the lack of food, or the panic from thinking he was going to report her.

He arrived just as she was finishing, beaming at her like they were old friends. “Done?”

She wrapped the arm back up again, concealing what it was but leaving it in an obvious place for the scientist whenever he

returned. He'd paid her upfront, thankfully. She scrawled a quick note to make sure he knew she was finished. "Done."

Pip's smile broadened, and he led her out of the workshops, out of the palace, into the grounds. The sky faded from blush to purple and deep, endless blue. The smog of the lower ring painted over the colour in the city, leaving everything dark and murky. She had ceased staring at the skies long ago, ceased looking up at all, but here the Dome was alight with splendid, shimmering colour, like fireflies dancing over the lakes of Navarra.

A guard cut across the lawn, illuminated by the faint light of the lamps and the starry sky. Pip jerked beside her, grabbing her arm and pulling her behind a tree.

Elena blinked. "Are we doing something we shouldn't be?"

"I would prefer not to be seen right now."

"Shirking your duties?"

"Something like that." He glanced around the tree. "Let's go another way," he declared.

Elena did not object. She followed Pip through the gardens coated in moonlight, marvelling at colours she'd thought she'd forgotten. Everything seemed softer in this part of the world, the blue-green of the grass shimmering with a brightness that moved beyond words to express.

"These gardens are beautiful," she remarked.

"They are," Pip agreed. "Although, for my money, I prefer something a little wilder. There's this section of the Toulousian

gardens near an overgrown wall, filled with bluebells and wildflowers and ivy. It's the quietest spot in the kingdom."

Elena smiled, thinking of the meadows back home, of the way she could disappear into them. "Tell me more about it."

"I like to go there to be alone. There's just enough of the old building to shelter under if there's rain, and it turns the stones silver, makes the bluebells almost sing, like they're coated with glass or powdered sugar."

"You're quiet the poet."

"I… I like nature," he confessed, like it was some great secret. "What about you? Tell me of some place in Navarra that sings for you."

"The meadows around what was once our farm," she admitted. "The grass is gold there, and whispers in the breeze. Come summer, it's alive with poppies—deep reds and blues. I think I lost years inside those meadows."

"Or gained them."

"Yes. That too."

Pip smiled at her, a smile that filled her in the way no offering of cake had ever done. "Come on," he said, "this way."

He steered her into a courtyard, far away from the bustle of the palace. Quiet streamed through the air like the delicate strings of a violin. She did not want to speak, afraid her voice would shatter the moment.

Pip pointed upwards. “I know they’re not real,” he told her. “But there are still stars in the skies. Try wishing upon one.”

It was silly. Foolish. The type of thing from fairytales. Wishing didn’t make a thing come true—hard work and perseverance did.

And yet, for once, for a moment, for a second, she wanted to believe. To indulge.

It cannot hurt to wish upon a star.

So she wished. She wished for fortune, for the chance to return to Navarra. She wished for success and companionship, and frivolous things like satin ballgowns and the chance to dance again. She dreamed big and long and hard.

But mostly, at the end of all her wishes, was one that screamed louder and harder than all the others, one she felt deep down in her bones and scarcely ever gave voice to.

And yet, at the end of the day, if she could only pick one…

I wish not to be alone any more.

“What did you wish for?” Pip asked.

“Everything,” she said. “You?”

“Too soon to say. Perhaps I shall tell you later.”

In the distance, a clocked chimed twelve.

“It is late,” said Pip. “Allow me to escort you to the lifts?”

They drifted back through the gardens, through glades filled with liquid moonlight, commenting on the statues and arrangements. Pip had a keen eye for sculpture, but he couldn’t

name the plants. Elena prattled on about each of them, every fact tugging her closer to home.

The journey to the lifts was over far too quickly.

“Thank you for today,” she said softly, as she waited to board.

“The pleasure,” he said, taking her hand and kissing the top of it, “was all mine.”

That night, as Elena drifted off, her mind did not start counting how long it would take her to save up enough for the journey home, or start conceiving new inventions, or working out problems. That night, she dreamed of grass turned silver by moonlight, and icy warmth inside her that she had not felt in a long, long time.



For the first time in as long as he could remember, Pip woke smiling. He did not wake thinking of trade deals or meetings, or his father's health, or unrest in the outskirts of Toulouse, or Sparta. He woke light, with a name he dared not whisper dancing round his mind.

Elena.

What an absolute stroke of luck to have run into her last night. Perhaps there were gods in the sky after all, and they'd decided to take pity on him. How long had it been since he'd enjoyed merely talking to someone, since a simple walk through the grounds had made him feel like he was swimming in liquid silver?

You're quite the poet.

Maybe he was. Maybe he had a skill after all. It wasn't quite bending metal like magic, like her skill, but it was something.

She was certainly something.

His good mood continued all through breakfast and even saw him through the first council meeting of the day. He entertained himself with thoughts of seeing her again, questions he could ask her, things they might discuss. He hoped he could procure some more cake. She'd seemed to like that.

Halfway through brunch in his private chambers, Susan said sharply, "You're awfully quiet and yet surprisingly happy. Did we attend the same meeting?"

Pip immediately crushed all thoughts of the night before, as if Susan could read them in his face. "Can't I just be happy for no reason?"

"No one is ever happy for no reason."

Pip said nothing.

"Where did you sneak off to last night?"

"I went to explore the workshops, would you believe? They're making some fabulous things there. Enlightening."

"Uh-huh." Susan narrowed her eyes. "Fine, then. Keep your secrets." She paused, looking down at her clipboard. "I received a telegram from your mother this morning."

Pip froze. "Is my father—"

"He's fine," Susan rushed. "Or no worse, perhaps I should say. She writes that the Navarran princess is arriving for the ball in a few weeks."

Pip groaned. His mother had been prattling on about the Navarran Princess, Sofia, for months now. They'd met in their youth as children and he recalled they had got on, but political duties had kept them apart for the last ten years. Navarra was one of the poorer kingdoms, and the royals felt it unwise to make frequent trips abroad with the economy being as it was. Pip actually admired that stance. What he didn't admire was the fact that his mother had made no secret of liking the idea of Pip making a match with Sofia.

"She's kind, polite, regal," she'd remind him at every opportunity. "And I hear, very beautiful."

Pip was not immune to beauty, but he didn't believe it should be a person's defining characteristic, nor particularly useful in the long run. Sofia's beauty didn't let him know if they'd actually like one another, if she'd make him laugh or feel at ease, or if he could repeat the favour for her.

"Just make sure you spend time with her if she visits Petragrad," his mother had suggested. "See if there's a spark."

A spark. *A spark.* Pip had heard of such things, but he'd yet to experience anything with anyone. He liked people, in general. He felt at ease in company and had many courtiers back home that he would call friends. But nothing more. He'd begun to think that there was something wrong with him, that it was never going to happen.

And yet…

He shook his head. It was too soon for that. Too soon and impossible.

“Your Highness?” Susan prompted. “Should I send a response to your mother?”

Pip waved a hand, “Send her the usual. Inquire after my father, update her on whatever you think necessary, and tell her I’ll ‘look to like, if looking liking moves, but no more deep will I endart mine eye, than your consent gives strength to make it fly.’ She’ll like that.”

Susan blinked at him, and thrust her clipboard in his direction. “How fast do you think I write?”

Pip picked up the pen and started to scribble. “Pretty fast.” He wrote the words diligently and handed it back. “Have I some free time now? I’d like to take a walk about the gardens.”

Susan checked her watch. “You have thirty minutes before you’re expected for boules on the lawns. Do you require an escort, or a reminder?”

“I shall be there, Sue. Have no fear.”

“Part of the job, alas. Take an umbrella if you’re going for a wander. The west side of the grounds is slated for rain and I know you don’t always look where you’re going.”

Pip smiled, folding an umbrella under his arm, and resisted the urge to kiss Susan on the cheek like a matronly aunt.

He took a leisurely stroll through the quieter part of the gardens, his feet taking him to the spot where he had come with Elena the night before. Pip, in general, considered himself more a ‘day’ person than a ‘night’ one, but he couldn’t

help but feel the garden had lost some of its lustre under the harshness of the sun.

His eyes turned to the Dome roof, remembering the spray of stars spread across the glass only a few hours ago.

"What did you wish for?" Elena had asked him.

He'd wished for peace and his father's health and a day off and the usual things, but the shine in her eyes had inspired another wish, too.

He wished for more evenings like that one, and the chance to get to know Elena better.

He knew he ought not to be thinking of her, that he ought to turn his mind towards important business, or even the Princess of Navarra. It wouldn't do to form any kind of attachment to anyone else.

He sighed, shook away his thoughts, and went to find the game.

Boules turned out to be a delightful distraction. The company was pleasant, Mira was absent, and with a game to focus on he was able to turn his thoughts away from politics, his father's poor health, and Elena's slight smile. She had the kind of face not too used to the action, the kind of face that made him want to speak nothing but soft words and light jokes until it crinkled with laughter.

On second thoughts, perhaps boules didn't *completely* distract him, nor did lunch, or dinner. He wanted to sneak back down to the workshops, but he was conscious of his presence

being missed, and that the workshop would likely still be full of other people. He could hardly talk to her then.

What if he *never* spoke to her again? What if he was always busy or she never came or there were too many other people in the room? He wouldn't remain in Petragrad for long. They might never have the opportunity—

He should have arranged a second visit. Asked to meet her in the gardens. Something.

But then what if that scared her off? You didn't invite someone you'd just met to speak with you privately in the gardens.

A hand clapped against his back. "Pip, old boy!" Nero exclaimed. "Fancy a walk through the grounds with a couple of rather lovely scientists I've just met? One's a redhead. Very fetching."

Well, maybe *some* people did.

"Not tonight, Nero. I have somewhere else to be."

"Better than a redhead's—"

"Nero!" one of the courtiers laughed, a young noble by the name of Sasha. A friend of Nero's, for whatever reason. "Let poor Pip be."

Nero shrugged, and left him to it.



The Baroness had cancelled most of Elena's long-term projects in light of her work at the palace, but there were still jobs to be finished and a steady influx of the smaller ones to manage. She made her way back to her garage workshop late the next morning, sneaking out while the Baroness was busy with her daughters' piano lessons so as to escape her wrath. Never mind that most days, the family were still asleep when Elena left for work.

She managed to grab six hours of solid sleep, more restful than usual, and somehow, the smog didn't seem quite so dark and dreary that morning. When she walked past the square where old Grandma was telling a story, she stopped to listen.

It was a story of a woman who found herself married to a monster, only to discover he was under a curse, and the monsters were the ones who had done this to him and led the woman to what they assumed was her death. It was quite the epic, a tale of magic, adventure, love and betrayal. Ordinarily, Elena would never have listened for so long, but there was something about that day that made her stop and listen.

"*What is this life, if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare…"*

It was one of her mother's favourite sayings, a poem from long ago. When they used to take walks in the woods together,

sometimes she would stop suddenly, staring at a red flower in the ferns, a bird in the trees, a babbling brook.

Elena had long since stopped finding beauty in anything, but she could still listen.

Well, apart from last night. *That* had been beautiful.

But she ought not to be thinking about that.

The story done, she thanked Grandma for the tale, added a copper to her jug, and carried on to the garage. She spent the next couple of hours sorting through her existing projects, finishing up a couple of the smaller ones, and tidying her workshop.

Snowdrop appeared just as she was getting started on something bigger, limping her way into the seat before Elena even noticed her.

She swivelled around, nearly dropping her blowtorch. "*Engranajes y dioses!*" she spat, turning off the flame. "What are you doing here?"

Snowdrop shrugged. "Can't a girl just drop in on another girl with no motive whatsoever?"

Elena raised an eyebrow.

"Fine!" Snowdrop threw up her hands. "I wanted to know how your first day at the palace went."

"So you can sneak in?"

"Well, maybe…"

Elena shook her head. “I didn’t see anything. I never even left the workshop. Just fixed some bots of theirs, that’s all.”

No need to tell her about Pip. No need to tell her about anything.

“Just bots?”

Elena turned back to her work, yanking out a faulty gear with her tweezers. “Well, at the end of the night some scientist asked me to fix an arm of some sort. Nothing major.”

Snowdrop paused. “An arm? What kind?”

“Human-shaped. Maybe a bit bigger than most. Intricate piece of kit, brilliant workmanship.”

“What was it for?”

“I don’t know. It could have been a prosthetic? Bit too bulky for an automaton.”

“Hmm.”

“What is it?” Elena turned around to face her. Snowdrop was perched on the edge of her seat, chewing the inside of her cheek. “Snowdrop?”

“Just deciding whether or not to tell you a secret we’ve not yet released to the masses.”

Elena froze. “And your conclusion?”

“Yeah, I’m going to do it.” She sighed, shifting her position. “We didn’t want to tell people this one as it’s a bit horrifying and we don’t want to create panic, or incur the wrath of the Crown’s response if it was known that we know.”

Elena's insides quivered. The Rebellion hardly seemed to care about spreading the news that the coal might be made from people. What could possibly be worse?

"The dread doctors aren't human," Snowdrop said.

Elena stiffened. The dread doctors were an ominous sight, and she didn't have much trouble imagining them as clockwork underneath their beaked masks and thick leather uniforms, but that hardly seemed more horrifying than the possible truth about the coal.

"What?"

"They *used* to be human," Snowdrop continued. "A few years ago, the Crown experimented with some of their soldiers, trying to make them stronger. It didn't go well. From what we can tell, it killed almost all of them, and after they were dead the scientists at the palace gave them clockwork parts to fix the ones they'd broken and made their corpses walk around again."

At that, Elena recoiled. "That… that shouldn't be possible."

"I have it on very good authority that it is."

Elena could understand not sharing that. It was somehow more disturbing, more sinister than the other rumours, especially as the dread doctors still prowled the streets. The people could check. They *would* check. And even though it wouldn't serve as irrefutable proof of the other accusations… it could start an uprising.

And the Rebellion didn’t want to start anything they wouldn’t win.

If it was true. And if that was true…

The ashes on the mantelpiece flickered in her mind.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Snowdrop said, tilting her head.

It wasn’t that she didn’t, it was that she didn’t want to. Couldn’t.

“It’s not possible,” she repeated, as if saying something again could make it true. “They wouldn’t.”

Snowdrop didn’t press it. She climbed to her feet, leaning against the side of the worktop. “You can believe whatever you want, I won’t force you,” she said. “But I’m trusting you not to spread it. We need to be ready.”

“For what?”

Snowdrop snorted. “Whatever comes next.”



Snowdrop’s revelation haunted her all through the day.

It couldn’t possibly be true, could it? Elena was no scientist, but that sort of accomplishment sounded impossible. It couldn’t be right.

She didn’t want to believe Snowdrop was lying to her, but perhaps she’d been misinformed. She said she ‘had it on high authority’. She hadn’t seen it for herself.

She could be wrong.

Or, said the sinister voice inside her, one she rarely liked to listen to, *perhaps she* is *lying to you. She’s manipulating you. She just wants you for a spy.*

You could check, said another voice. *Bump into one. Just a bump. You know what metal feels like.*

She refused to listen to either, and focused on her work. When she made her way to the palace later that day, she even let herself think about Pip, just for a moment, wondering if he would come to see her.

But he wouldn’t, of course. No one ever did.

Maybe you should throw your lot in with the Rebellion after all. What do you have to lose? No one would miss you if you died.

She shook her head, refusing to let that thought surface. She would lose whatever happened next, her future, herself.

I still have things to lose.

Everyone did.

She worked long into the night, broken bot after broken bot, adjustment after adjustment. Anything to keep her mind occupied. Every other mechanic had left long before she heard a *thump, thump* down the corridor.

Her heart stuttered.

Don't check.

Another thump.

Don't.

A chink.

It never hurt to look.

She peered out into the corridor. A dread doctor and a scientist were making their way down to the door at the end. Elena watched the broad-shouldered figure, as if her eyes could peel back the layers.

Was there really metal underneath?

The scientist unlocked the door and stepped inside with the dread doctor, the rest slamming shut.

Elena knew she shouldn't follow, shouldn't even be thinking about it. What would she say if she was caught?

Perhaps she could pretend the door was open, that she heard a noise, that she was concerned…

Perhaps she wouldn't get caught at all.

All the way towards the door, she tried to convince herself that she should turn back, that she didn't need to know, that she would be fine to spend the rest of her life in ignorance. Part of her prayed that the door would be impossible to open, but when she saw it, she knew that she could do it. It was fancy, but she knew.

You were given this gift for a reason. The Gods gave you this gift. Use it.

She went back and collected her tools.

Breaking any lock was easy with the right equipment. Breaking a lock and ensuring that no one knew you had broken it was harder. Elena opened up the mechanism and set to work, ears pricked for the slightest movement or agitation.

There would be no explaining this if she was caught. She'd just need to get out before anyone found her.

The door clicked open.

She repaired the rest of the mechanism, and, knowing that no excuse would work if she was found with her toolkit, she returned it to the workshop before stepping over the threshold, and slunk along the dark, dimly lit corridor.

The whir of gears and machines greeted her. Usually, the sound was comforting, like the voice of an old friend, but nothing like comfort reached her now. There was a coldness to the hum, a hardness that grated against her bones.

She steeled herself, and walked on, sticking to the shadows. The corridor widened, one of the walls giving way to glass. Elena froze. There was still time to turn back. She didn't need to see—

Someone was coming down the corridor. Not thinking, Elena turned to the nearest door and rushed inside. She pressed herself against the shut door, praying that no one followed,

that she hadn't been spotted. The footsteps got closer and closer…

And passed, vanishing in the direction of the rest of the palace.

Elena took a deep, steadying breath, climbed back to her feet, and almost screamed.

The room was filled with dozens of metal stretchers, loaded with bodies, half formed, missing parts, some no more than malformed torsos.

Wires spat from their skin. There was flesh, but it was riddled with metal.

Nothing Snowdrop had told her could have prepared her for this.

Sound screeched away from her. Her voice vanished. Nausea sprung from her belly. She doubled over, waiting to be sick, but it didn't come. After a few seconds of retching, she found the strength to stumble backwards, willing the sight to disappear.

No, no, no, it's not real. It can't be.

She backed into a desk. Papers slid to the floor, diagrams of how the monsters were made, how their makers had dissected muscle and put back metal in its place. Elena had scribbled thousands of similar blueprints in her time, but never with *people*. Wires and veins intermingled, steel and skin layered together. Cogs clicked instead of heartbeats.

This wasn't science, this wasn't progress.

This was an abomination.

Sound from the room next door. Something kicked into gear inside her, reminding her that she couldn't be found, that she needed to get out.

But her feet wouldn't move. She stayed where she was, gaze riveted on the demonic sketchings, unblinking, unmoving.

Hell is empty, she realised, remembering a line from a tale she'd heard long ago. The holy book? She couldn't recall.

All the devils are here.

But here the devils wore white coats and spoke like humans, all the while taking people apart and turning them into something, something—

Else.

The handle on the adjoining door rattled.

Get out. A voice pulsed inside her. *Get out, get out, get out!*

Elena's feet unlatched from the floor. She scrambled towards the door, hands shaking, wrenching it open and stumbling out into the corridor, heart in her throat. She slammed the door shut behind her, praying no one saw her, but barely caring anymore. As long as she got out, as long as she got away, she didn't care about the consequences.

She hurtled down the hallway, through the entrance towards the workshop, into the room—

And straight into Pip.

“Evening!” he said cheerily. “How are you?”

“I… I’m…”

Elena stumbled, and her legs slipped out from under her. Pip rushed forward, steering her towards a bench at the side of the room and not letting go of her elbows.

“What’s wrong?”

As much as she wanted to tell someone—anyone—she couldn’t. Her words had seized up in her mouth.

Pip hurried out of the room, giving her a few moments to collect herself. Before long, he was back again, pressing a glass to her lips. The room stopped spinning, the nausea fading to a dull ache.

“Elena?” Pip prompted, hand hovering by her shoulder. “Are you ill? You look awfully pale.”

“A headache,” she whispered. “Nothing more. The water helps—thank you.”

Pip did not look convinced, but he did not press it. “You’re sure you don’t need anything else?”

She shook her head. Pip urged her to drink again, and got up and went to her desk. It took her a while to realise he was tidying it for her, putting everything back in its place with surprising efficiency.

“You’re done for the day,” he declared, fetching her coat from the peg beside the door. He helped her into it, hands hovering over the fasteners. “Can you stand? Let me help

you.” He put an arm around her waist and tugged her to her feet. Stable as she was, she was glad of the weight, the sturdiness of his presence. “Can I send for someone to escort you home? I… I can’t leave the palace, I’m afraid.”

Elena shook her head again, about all she could manage. “I’ll be fine,” she said. “It’s only a headache.”

Pip swallowed, saying nothing, remaining tightly by her side the entire walk towards the lifts. Any dim thought of asking him why he had come had been evaporated by the horror she had witnessed.

“I’ll come and check on you tomorrow, if I may?” he asked as they neared the booth.

At this, she could only nod.

A coldness crept into her bones as she descended through the clouds, needle-thin and everywhere at once. The bodies—those *things*—were branded into her.

Were they alive? Some of them were moving, their few remaining muscles twitching as the wires spasmed out of them…

Please let them not have been alive, she prayed, *let them not have been in pain.*

She knew, even before the lift juddered to a stop, there was no going home tonight.

No going *back.*



Elena didn't know which garage was Snowdrop's, but she'd break into them all if necessary. She banged on every door, hissing her name, cursing the stars and the Dome and everything under it. Her knuckles cracked from pounding, but she barely felt it.

"Snowdrop! Answer me!"

"Thank you for reminding me why we have codenames," said a voice.

Elena swivelled. Snowdrop stood under one of the garage doors, leaning on a makeshift cane. There was a smirk on her face, but it dropped the second she spied Elena. "You've seen something."

"I saw…" her voice choked on the words. "I saw…"

"Come in," said Snowdrop quickly. "In case the shadows have ears."

Elena hurried inside, dimly aware of the trust Snowdrop was placing in her, revealing the location of her safehouse. The trust barely registered, panic and horror still coursing through her. Snowdrop handed her a flask of something. Whiskey, cheap and foul. Elena downed the contents.

"There's a… a workshop. Under the palace. I saw all these bodies…"

“All?”

“Dozens. Dozens of them. Men and women, half flesh, half gears. Alive, dead… it didn’t seem to matter. Some didn’t have *limbs*. They’d been… snipped away, to be replaced with something else. I can’t… I can’t even…” Her chest shuddered. “It’s true, isn’t it? Every rumour. All of it. The Crown is using the dead as fodder.”

Snowdrop hung her head. “We knew that they’d used soldiers in the past to make dread doctors. We knew they used the dead to make the coal. We only suspected they sometimes used them for… other things.”

Hot tears dribbled down Elena’s cheeks. What had her father been used for? Had she passed his walking corpse on the street, or used it to power her furnace?

“I want to help,” she said, trying to voice that pain into meaning, to strengthen her resolve. She would steel herself. She would not crumble.

Snowdrop nodded, but she did not seem pleased with this victory.

“Whatever you want,” Elena insisted. “Whatever you need me to do. I’ll do it. I swear.”

“Go back to the palace,” Snowdrop said. “Carry on as usual. Keep your ears open, but don’t do anything stupid. Show them how good an engineer you are.”

“Show them…” The words spun round Elena’s head, and her eyes widened, imagining what the Crown might use her

talents for. “No. No, I couldn’t—”

“It may not come to that, but it never hurts—”

“If I go back in that room again, I’m going to vomit.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t,” Snowdrop returned, as if impressed by her resolve. “Just go back, then. Keep going as you are now.”

“All right,” said Elena. “I’ll do it.”

“Good.” Snowdrop folded her arms. “We’ll be in touch.”



Elena managed to keep it together all the way back to the Baroness’ apartment, managed to keep her emotions at bay all the way through the narrow, blackened streets and up to the stuffy top floor. She couldn’t bear the thought of crying where anyone could see her. If she could hold them in just a little longer, maybe she wouldn’t cry at all. Maybe her tears would dissolve, or transform into steel.

Maybe, maybe, maybe…

She turned the handle into the apartment. She’d just go splash her face in the bathroom, and then climb into bed. Just a few more actions, a few more steps, and she’d be safe.

But she lost it when she turned into the main room, and the first thing she saw was her father’s ashes.

She was never going to take him home.

He would never rest beside her Mama beneath the tree, never drift in the wheat fields, never return to Navarra.

Never mind wherever his soul was; there was nothing she could cling to. Nothing to hold.

And there hadn't been for years.

Something deep cracked in her chest, like glass in a vice. *Papa, Papa…* and a string of shapeless words she could not give voice to.

"Elena?" said a quiet voice behind her. "Are you all right?"

Elena couldn't turn, couldn't move, couldn't explain, couldn't do anything, not even when her youngest stepsister reached out to touch her shoulder and she crumpled against her, sinking like a paper boat.

Her father used to make little boats, setting them adrift on the pond outside their house.

They would never go back.

She was losing him all over again.

Another door creaked open. "Gears, what's wrong with her?"

Mariah shrugged. Ivanka groaned. "Get her into her room. If Maman sees her…"

Elena knew she should be more afraid. The Baroness would not take kindly to this display. But how could anything she would do be worse than what Elena had just discovered?

Her stepsisters pulled her from the floor and tugged her into her bedroom. The three of them barely fit, so Ivanka dumped her on the bed and left her, muttering under her breath. Mariah stayed, unlacing her bodice, peeling her out of her clothes, tucking away her boots and sliding her into bed. She stroked her hair, like Elena was a child. Perhaps she was. She could hardly breathe for sobbing, and clutched at her singular, flat pillow like a child might a toy.

"It's all right," Mariah whispered. "I think. I don't know. What's wrong?"

Elena wanted to tell her. Not everything, just that her father's ashes weren't real, but she couldn't tell her the truth, knowing it would likely get back to the Baroness and she'd have to explain how she knew. She had no choice but to circle the drain of grief, alone again, knowing that she could never risk pulling another person in with her.



Pip tried not to be disappointed about not being able to speak to Elena properly the night before. He tried, and failed. He knew he was being foolish. Doubtless, given how ill she'd looked, the night had been far worse for her.

Unless she was faking it because she didn't want to speak to him.

He shook that thought away. Not through any sense of vanity or pride, but because of how pale she'd looked, how shaken.

Almost afraid.

His stomach churned at such a thought. What if she wasn't ill, but frightened? What if something had happened to her?

All disappointment quickly vanished, replaced with a palpable concern. What could have happened to her down there? He still had no idea where Nero had got to. If she'd come across him—

No, Nero was a rake, but he didn't seem the type to foster those kinds of ill intentions. And Elena, muscled from her work and quick with her words, did not seem like she couldn't defend herself.

Although she could still be shaken even if she was strong enough to…

Pip smothered his thoughts again. What would he even do if some man did try to hurt her? Challenge them to a duel? He wasn't exactly good with fisticuffs.

Still, thoughts of Elena plagued him for the rest of the day, and he prayed she'd be back again, and all right.

Even though he should probably just be praying he could stop thinking about her.



Elena dreamt of limbless torsos, blank eyes, and wires pulsing blood. She dreamt she saw her father's face among the dead, and that her mother was a marionette with a painted face, skipping down the halls, singing discordantly. Her mouth dripped oil on the palace carpets, and the trail led back to Elena's workshop. Inside were dozens of iced cakes, but when she reached out to touch one, blood oozed out in place of cream.

A clock chimed in the distance. Grandfather clocks spouted out of the walls, but their insides surged with body parts rather than gears. Cuckoos spat out mechanical eyes.

Snowdrop sat perched on one of the workbenches, drinking tea with Pip. Elena ran towards them, but stopped in her tracks when they both started to laugh, slowly, mechanically, like their voices were stitched together with bits of metal.

“You’re not one of us,” Snowdrop crooned.

Pip’s smile twisted. “You’ll never be one of us.”

Bars slammed around her, and Elena woke to find her sheets soaked with sweat and tangled around her. A sob caught in her throat. She’d had dreams like that after the assassination attempt, too, where real horrors birthed fictional nightmares.

She scrubbed herself raw in the bath long before the rest of the apartment woke. It was several hours still until she was due at the palace, and yet returning to sleep was unthinkable. Instead, she headed off to her workshop, with only the low hum of the gears to keep her company as she walked. Upon arrival, she cleaned the entire place, sorted through all her equipment, oiled her tools, reorganised. She finished almost all of her remaining jobs.

And when she found herself close to breaking, exhausted from work, from powering through without eating, she crawled under the bench, traced the lines of the star-cross, and repeated the holy prayer.

She was home in Navarra, at the borough chapel, kneeling at the altar. Mother was beside her, calm, quiet, serene. The whole place hummed with silence, and the words buzzed through her.

Warm. Sheltered. Safe.

“I am not alone,” she whispered, hands clenched over her heart. “I am not alone.”

But you are. You are and always will be. No one cares for you.

“Someone watches over me,” she told herself, because the alternative was unthinkable.

She crawled out, made herself something to eat, and headed off to the palace.

Elena followed Snowdrop’s advice, working diligently and efficiently, although whether or not that was because she wanted to be noticed or because she just didn’t want to think, she wasn’t sure. Whenever her mind wandered down the hall, she thought of all the other things she could be doing.

Actually, if she finished early, she could try and look around the rest of the palace. She didn’t want to go down *there* again, but there must be other places of interest. The barracks, perhaps. The political offices. That first lock hadn’t been hard to break. If she could do that, if she’d braved the bunker…

She could do more.

She *would* do more.

She *had* to do more.

The rest of the mechanics finished their quota and shuffled off, but Elena stayed, devising new schemes in her head as she fiddled with the gears. There was no way she could just waltz into the palace. She'd need a plan, a disguise, a costume—

"I come bearing cake!"

Pip.

Elena looked up, her startled face quickly giving way to a smile. Pip beamed back, the type of grin that sent her stomach reeling.

He probably looks like that at everyone, she told herself. *It means nothing.*

"Good to see you," Pip continued, placing down a small tray filled with treats. Elena's mouth watered, and she bit into the first one eagerly; a small pastry stuffed with dates, a Navarran speciality. "I must admit I was worried about you yesterday."

Elena shrugged. "I'm quite recovered, thank you."

"Good," he said, pouring her a cup of tea, "most excellent, in fact."

She smiled at his manners, smiled at all of him, actually.

"Is there something on my face?" Pip asked, patting his cheeks. "You're looking at me oddly."

"You are very cute," Elena replied, and then buckled at her own boldness, her cheeks on fire.

Pip froze, too. He scratched the back of his neck. “Cute. Yes, thank you, that’s what every man wants to hear from a pretty girl.”

Elena blinked, certain she’d misheard. She hadn’t been pretty since she was a girl in ribbons, before grease and exhaustion had wiped her looks from her. “You think I’m pretty?”

Pip stared at her, eyes wide. “Was that not obvious? Or… or was it inappropriate? It was inappropriate, wasn’t it? I apologise—”

“Pip,” she said quietly, “what are you doing here?”

“Flirting with you very badly, apparently.”

The smile curled up again, brighter than before. Flirting. He was flirting with her. Seeing her. She was being seen.

“I’m almost finished with work,” she said, “if you want to take a walk afterwards?”

His beam, if possible, grew wider. “I’d be delighted.”

Before long, the two of them headed out into the gardens, lawns thick with moonlight. She spoke to him of Navarra, memories of sleeping with her friends beneath the folded stars. Pip was quieter, listening to her tales, but told her a little of Toulouse, too.

“How long have you served the royal family?” she asked him.

“Come again?”

“Your job,” she said. “How long have you been doing it?”

He sighed. “What feels like my entire life.”

“Is it a family job?”

“Most certainly.”

She smiled, turning to face him. “Tell me more of your family.”

“Ah, well, it’s just the three of us. No siblings. A fair few extended family, though. One very busy-body grandma…”

“I think I like her already.”

“Oh, you’d change your mind if you met her. Woman’s a battleaxe.”

“I do enjoy a well-crafted weapon…”

He laughed, short but full. “My mother is a lovely woman. Strict but fair. Affectionate if you know how she shows it. A little too interested in my love life…” He trailed off. “My father is another matter. He thinks I should be free to follow my own heart, even though…”

She waited for him to finish, but he seemed to have quite forgotten he was speaking. “And have you?” she prompted.

“What?”

“Followed your own heart?”

He sighed. “I have been somewhat lacking in the opportunity…”

Elena caught his gaze. “Me too.”

“No one special in your life?”

She shook her head. “I had a sweetheart back in Navarra, but that was a long time ago.”

A very long time ago. She remembered the details of her courtship with Alejandro as one might a story; like it was something that had happened to another person. Stolen kisses in the barn and not-quite-fumbles in the hay came to her like a hazy dream, a figment of imagination rather than fact.

“I’ve tried my hand at courting, too,” Pip went on. “Never much went anywhere.”

“The job keep you too busy?”

“I suppose. Mostly I never really liked anyone enough to make time for them.”

They sat down on a bench beside the maze in a quiet corner of the grounds, gazing at the stars above.

“How are you finding Petragrad?” she asked him.

He sighed. “I’m concerned the rumours about its origins might be true. I’m concerned *all* the rumours might be true.”

Elena froze. She had not expected that reply. She expected him to talk about the food or the climate or the people. Not that. Anything but that.

“And what if they were?” she managed, hoping the dark hid most of her fear.

Pip’s jaw tightened. “I doubt most of the monarchs of the other kingdoms would care much even if they were; most of

their coal power comes from Petragrad and they cannot afford a dissolution of the monarchs—”

A sharp voice cut through the night air; someone was calling for Prince Phillippe.

Pip froze. “Oh dear.”

“Why?” Elena raised an eyebrow. “Were you supposed to be watching him?”

“I… I just realised there’s somewhere I’m supposed to be.”

The voice grew louder. Pip almost fell over getting up. “If she comes round that corner, don’t tell her you saw me. Woman’s terrifying.”

“All right.”

Pip started off across the lawn, but stopped shortly, spinning around. “Tomorrow night,” he said. “Can I see you again? Here? Same time.”

Elena’s cheeks warmed. “You shall have to bring me more cake.”

He smiled. “It’s a promise.”

The screeching voice was heard again, breaking off to speak to someone. Pip disappeared into the night.

Elena lay back on the bench, trying not to clutch too hard at the lightness in her chest, lest it be wrenched from her in a moment.

*

As she had done the previous day, Elena went to her garage early in the morning. There was little to do, but it was the only place in the world that really felt like hers, and it was as good a place as any to pass the time. She counted out her coins, trying to recalculate how long it would take her to afford her ticket now with the fee she'd received from the scientist, and created another small roving doll out of her piles of scrap.

Her mind wandered to Pip again, and she wondered if there was anything she could make out of her scraps for him, but she doubted he wanted a roving doll, and at the moment all she knew he liked was tea and stars.

Someone banged lightly on her half-open door, and she looked up to see Snowdrop standing there, escorted by two other people.

"I haven't learned anything—" Elena started.

"That's not why we're here," Snowdrop rushed. "We've just intercepted intel from Sparta. Tell me, how do you feel about kidnapping a prince?"



THE PLAN

Elena blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“This is Dandelion and Clover,” Snowdrop continued, pointing to the two men behind her. One was a skinny teenager, with hair the colour of straw, the other a silver-haired man with one of those faces that could have been twenty-four or forty-two. Both smiled weakly in greeting.

“We’ve just come from the Outlands,” the younger one—Clover—reported. “We’ve got word that Sparta is planning to assassinate one of the princes on the night of the grand ball. We want to kidnap him instead.”

“But—I—” Words, questions, and tangled thoughts spiralled in Elena’s mind. She took a minute to force them into a sentence. “Which prince? Nero, or—”

Snowdrop pulled a face of disgust. “If he was the target, I’d let Sparta have him. No. It’s the Toulousian one. Phillippe.”

“Why?”

“That’s what we want you to find out. Does he know something we don’t? Does he take a different stance in the war? We need to know. He could be an ally.”

“Or a powerful political hostage,” Clover added. “Been a while since we had one of those.”

Snowdrop elbowed him in the side, before turning back to Elena. “Can you help us?”

“I—”

She thought of Pip’s comments about his concerns that Petragrad’s rumours were true. Was this a fear he shared with the prince? Was that why Sparta was after him? If so, she wasn’t the only spy in the palace.

Snowdrop raised an eyebrow. “You know something.”

“I… I met a boy. Toulousian. One of the servants the prince brought with him.”

“What did he say to you?”

Elena repeated what little she knew, even though it felt somehow disloyal to drag Pip into this. She didn’t know why; she’d known him even less time than Snowdrop.

The three rebels cast silent looks between them.

“You should get closer to this boy,” Snowdrop advised. “Find out what else he knows.”

“I…” *I don’t want that to be the reason I get closer to him.*

At the same time, she was fairly sure Pip wouldn’t want anything to happen to his prince. In fact, trying to save a life

was a more noble endeavour than the simple spywork she'd initially signed up for.

"All right," she said. "I'll see what I can do."

Snowdrop beamed. "Excellent. This could be just the opportunity we need."

"Why… why do we need to kidnap him?" Elena asked. "Why not simply warn him—"

"If Sparta are going to break into the palace on the night of the grand ball, we aren't going to waste that opportunity. If we can get him instead, if we can give Toulouse their prince back, without Mira… they might ally with us."

"You want to start a civil war."

"We're already at war," Snowdrop snapped. "Just the people on the losing side are dying in the slums rather than on the battlefield."

Elena buckled. It was hard to disagree with that. And she wanted to help them, she did, it was just…

Her boot brushed against the canister under her workbench. If she got caught, everything was for nothing. But if she did nothing, then…

You wanted to fix the world, Elena. Here is your chance.

"I'll help you," she said, "but after we save the prince, I want you to take me with you. Get me out of this city."

It wasn't home. Not even close. But maybe it was a faster road to getting there.

“Done,” said Snowdrop shortly. “Any further questions?”



Work could not speed by fast enough for Elena that day. She raced through it, half eager to see Pip, half dreading having to try and interrogate him for information. Perhaps she wouldn’t even try. She’d just let him talk, like she had always done.

She finished work early and headed to the bathroom to try and freshen up. It did no good, of course. The grease was caked into her skin.

He likes you anyway, she told herself. *For some reason.*

It was still early when she headed to the gardens, but no one stopped her. The few courtiers walking around gave her a couple of curt looks, but likely assumed she was running an errand.

Pip was nowhere to be seen, of course.

She looked up at the clock attached to the side of the palace, a beautiful thing, gold and marble. She was far too early.

She sat down and tried to relax, wondering if she was more nervous about spying, or just about spending time with him.

Don’t like him too much. This can go nowhere. He will be leaving after the ball.

But it was almost three weeks till then. Three weeks more of pleasant company. She could not baulk at that.

There was a rustle along the path, and she looked up hopefully.

It wasn't Pip though—it was Prince Nero.

She lowered her gaze, expecting him to slink away, or ignore her. He didn't.

"Well, hello, hello," he slurred, wobbling forward. "What do we have here? A mechanic?"

"I… I've finished my duties for today," she said quickly. "I didn't think anyone would mind if I just took a moment in the gardens—"

"Well, I certainly don't!" Nero made a sound like a laugh, but it was hollow underneath. He slumped down beside her, holding out the bottle in his hands. "Want a taste? I've heard it's very good. I stopped tasting it about half a bottle ago."

"Umm… no thanks."

"Hmm. Suit yourself." He took another swig, and fell back against the grass. His silver rings clinked against the bottle, sparkling in the light. Nothing else glittered—his eyes were voids beneath the painted sky. "Pretty night," he remarked.

"They always are."

"Sneak off here often, little mechanic?"

"I," said Elena, stiffening, "am not little."

They were nearly identical in height, and she probably had more muscle on her than this pampered prince did, although she was not going to test the theory.

He barked a laugh, twisting on his side to admire her better. “What’s your name?”

She realised she should probably give him a fake one, but in the moment, it didn’t come to her. “Elena.”

“Beautiful.” She waited for him to make some comment on her appearance—praising it or insulting it, she wasn’t really sure. But he didn’t. He turned back to staring wistfully into the distance.

Another person came around the corner, a stunning, voluptuous woman in a gold dress, curls piled on top of her head and studded with pearls and leaves. Elena wished she could sink into shadow, scalded by the rays of her brilliance.

The woman sighed, shaking her head at Nero, sprawled out on the grass. “Oh, Nero, what is the matter with you?”

Nero laughed, hard and painful. “Dear sister, I have quite the list, shall I read it to you?”

“Get off the floor and return to the party.”

“I’ve had quite enough of partying, wouldn’t you agree? Quite ruined myself, I think.”

The woman—who Elena now realised must be Princess Lucia, Nero’s sister—groaned, strode forward, and dragged him to his feet.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he hissed, head rolling against her shoulder. “You’d like it if I was ruined. If I messed up so badly mother completely disowned me. Paved the way for you as queen.”

Lucia stared at the ground as if she could draw daggers from it, a look that suggested perhaps she thought just that. “I’d prefer it if you could get your act together and be the prince everyone expects you to be.”

“Liar,” he continued, voice lined with ice. “You want the throne, Luce. Just admit it.”

“I want it in *safe hands,*” she continued. “Now shut up, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

His head lolled to one side. “I’m just doing what you said,” he snarled. “Being the prince everyone expects me to be. That’s all I’ve ever really done, that you know of…”

His voice trailed off, and fairly soon, the two of them had disappeared. Elena stared after, not sure what to make of the exchange, and whether any of it was worth reporting to Snowdrop. ‘Prince Nero is a drunken fool’ was hardly newsworthy.

But was he merely a drunken fool? In the brief few minutes she’d seen of him, she’d witnessed him charming and flirty and cruel and sarcastic. She’d heard someone say once—though she couldn’t for the life of her remember—that Nero was “a viper masquerading as a dog.” He was viewed by many as a favoured pet of Queen Mira’s, practically living at the Imperial Palace despite being Firenze’s crown prince.

And yet, when he spoke to her…

Elena shook it away, unable to put it into words.

Moments later, Pip arrived. “Was that Prince Nero I saw being dragged away?”

“It was. Is he all right?”

“I have no idea. Why do you ask?”

“There was just something…” She pushed the thoughts back. “Never mind. Good evening, Pip of the Palace, how are you?”

He offered her a hand, helping her off the ground. They moved away from the spot, as if Prince Nero’s presence had tainted it. “Better, now.”

“That was smooth.”

“I may have been practising a little before I saw you.”

Elena giggled, and Pip paused, as if something about that sound had struck him.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked.

“I’m afraid I forgot the cake.”

Elena laughed. “It was not the cake I came for.”

Pip’s cheeks reddened. “Well, that’s lovely to know.”

“How was your day?”

“Oh, the usual, busy and boring. Yours?”

“The same. Only I quite like the work.” They sat down together on the grass, eyes staring upwards at the starry sky.

“What would you be, if not a servant?” she asked him after a moment had passed.

“A tea-maker. Obviously. I’d run a little teashop in the merchant’s quarter.”

“You answered too quickly.”

“Did I?” He sighed, running a hand through his hair and grasping at the curls. “The truth of the matter is I’ve never given much thought to what I would be if I had the choice. It’s all been rather… set in stone.”

“I know that feeling.” She paused. “Do you like being a servant?”

Pip took a moment to reply. “There are parts to my role I enjoy,” he admitted. “I like helping people. I just sometimes worry it isn’t enough, you know?”

She swallowed. “Yes.”

If she told him that she was working with the rebels now, would he report her? He wouldn’t, surely—not if she told him she was trying to save the life of his prince? He would want to stop that, to help them—

Unless, of course, he didn’t believe her. Unless he thought she was lying. Or that the rebels were lying to her. Perhaps he’d feel honour-bound to tell someone else, or let the appropriate authorities deal with the threat.

You do not know this man, she reminded herself. *There is too much at stake.*

Pip turned his face towards her, his pale face glowing in the false moonlight, his skin pearl-white, eyes bright as stars. “Are you all right?” he asked.

The look he gave her made the next lie easy. “Yes.”

His fingers inched through the grass, searching for hers. His skin was as soft as the memory of satin. He ought to be disgusted over how rough and coarse hers were, but he laced into them as carefully as if they held a fragile baby bird.

Elena’s breath hitched, and she inclined her face towards him, charting the constellations in his eyes.



How long had it been since she had held another's hand? She used to do it with her friends all the time, with her parents, with people who'd lived with them on their old estate, who'd raised her as family. She had done it with Alejandro, too—even stared at the stars with him. She remembered that the grass was damp. She knew her heart must have skipped a beat, she recalled a memory of giddiness—but she couldn't feel it.

The imprint of Pip's fingers stayed with her long after they had parted. That night as she lay in bed, she clutched that feeling against her chest, took it out again to inspect it like a statuette, admiring the curves and contours. His hands had been so warm and soft, silk next to sandpaper of hers.

He'd not complained about her rough palms and calluses. He'd said nothing, his fingers slowly sliding into hers at the slightest pressure.

He'd held them very tightly, and they were slow to leave as they said goodbye.

Foolish, foolish, stupid. She was only clinging to him because he was the first person in years who'd been any sort of interested in her. The only one other than Snowdrop who noticed her.

And Snowdrop wanted to use her. Nice as she was too, that shimmered under anything else. Snowdrop had been kind to her because she needed her help, first and foremost.

But Pip didn't seem to want anything from her at all. He hadn't even tried to kiss her.

To kiss her.

She wanted him to kiss her. If he had tried, she wouldn't have stopped him. If he had tried, she would have kissed him back, would have clung to him, pressed her body to his, inhaled him like fine wine and memories of happiness that twitched like ghosts in the back of her mind.

"Tomorrow night then," he'd said, as they said goodbye at last. "If we can both get away."

"Tomorrow night."

His phantom arms encased her now, a living vision of his lips numbing her mouth. She imagined his breath inside her, the pressure of his fingers on the back of her spine, his hands in her hair. She imagined them in other, deeper places, places that were hers but that she'd never shared with anyone.

Elena turned over in bed and smashed her face into her pillow. She didn't know if she never wanted to see him again —if she wanted to run away from this feeling before it choked

her—or if she wanted the hours to pass in an instant, just so she could see him again sooner.



Alas, when the next evening came, Pip did not meet her in the gardens. Elena tried not to be disappointed, but she felt his complete absence more on her one day off. Not, of course, that Elena was permitted a break. The Baroness had her scrubbing the apartment from top to bottom. Mariah slunk out of the kitchen after dinner to help with the dishes. She was hopeless at washing, but she dried well enough, and Elena was secretly glad of the company.

"You seem different," Mariah remarked, sliding away the chipped china plates. They'd been a wedding gift from someone—Elena couldn't remember who—and they couldn't be worth much if the Baroness had managed to hold onto them, but the quality was fine. The patterns bore symbols of sunflowers and pumpkins and suns—signs associated with Navarra—alongside gears and peacocks… symbols of Petragrad. The coming together of two families, two cultures. There were other little nods to the idea, a sword, representing the family of Hernandez, and a lily which had something to do with the Baroness' birth name. Elena couldn't remember it

now, but she remembered receiving the plates, how she thought it meant something.

What would someone put on a plate for Pip, she wondered? She hadn't asked his surname. She imagined a teacup would be on there somewhere.

"Elena?" Mariah nudged her elbow. "I said, 'you seem different.'"

"Do I?"

"You were singing while you were washing. I can't remember the last time you did that."

"Oh." Elena hadn't even been aware she was doing it. "What was I singing?"

"An old Navarran song. I couldn't understand it. It was very pretty, though."

Elena started to hum under her breath, switching through various tunes she barely remembered until Mariah found the one she recognised. "Yes! That one! What's it about?"

"Oh, a lady singing for her true love, asking him to find her as the nightingale sings… it makes more sense in Navarran."

"Could you teach it to me?"

Elena blinked. Never, not once, had Mariah asked to learn any Navarran.

"Of course."

She started with the chorus, although Mariah's pronunciation was terrible and it seemed to take forever for

her to even closely mimic the words Elena was singing. Her words were slurred, half-lost, half-nonsensical. But it was silly and funny and they were laughing by the end.

"Mariah!" hissed a cool, dark voice.

Elena turned. The Baroness stood in the doorway, arms tight at her sides. "Mariah, what are you doing, cleaning dishes? That is no task for a lady." She sneered the final word.

You told me I was a lady, once, Elena wanted to retort, only the words never formed beyond a thought.

Mariah went quiet. "I'm sorry, Maman. I was just—"

"Yes?" the Baroness prompted. "You were just doing *what?*"

For years, Elena had held out hope that one of her stepsisters, just once, would *say something.* "I was just helping out Elena because she does so much and we so little." "I was cleaning the dishes, because I dirtied them too." "I just don't understand why we do this."

Why, why, why?

That was always the question—one Elena had long since stopped asking herself, just as surely as she'd stopped hoping.

Mariah hung her head. "Nothing, Maman."

"Good. Go to your room."

Mariah said nothing as she scurried away, mouse-like, eyes down. The Baroness' rose to Elena's, hard and steely.

"You are not to accept help from Mariah, is that clear?"

“Yes, Baroness.”

“And if I catch you teaching her silly songs again, I will have you sleeping in your garage for a week.”

“Yes, Baroness.”

The Baroness’ lips thinned. Sometimes, Elena thought, the Baroness looked like she *wanted* Elena to retort, that she wanted her to fight back just so that she could retaliate.

But Elena never did, not anymore.

“Good,” she said sharply. “Then finish up in here. There’s plenty more to be getting on with.”

*

Elena worked so hard on her day off that she was relieved when the next morning rolled around and work began again in the palace. Her entire body ached, and she hadn’t had the rest she needed to recover. It was bliss to set herself down at her workbench, pull on her goggles, and get to fixing. She was conscious of how chafed her hands were from yesterday’s work, her knuckles raw and cracked, and what Pip might think if he held them again today.

If he even came.

She knew he would have his reasons, that he likely found it as hard to sneak away as she did, but that didn’t stop disappointment nestling in her chest.

One-by-one, the other mechanics left for the day. Elena waited until the coast was clear, and slunk into the gardens to

their appointed spot.

Pip was already there, together with a picnic basket. He grinned broadly as she approached. “Hello,” he said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t meet you the other day. I was… held up. I’ve brought food as compensation.”

Elena smiled, resisting the urge to tear into the basket, and basked in the light of his gaze instead. “It will have to be really good food, if it is to compensate for the loss of your company.”

Pip’s cheeks pinkened. “I am sure that it shall do the trick.”

He held out a steaming cloth. Inside was a doughy wrap. Elena bit into it eagerly, soft meat and fiery spices exploding across her tongue. The dough had a sweet, corn-like taste to it. Another Navarran dish.

“How did you get this?” she asked, reaching for another.

“I may have suggested to the kitchen staff that with the Navarran princess heading here for the ball, they perhaps might want to start practising some of her native dishes.”

“You’re so thoughtful,” Elena said, mouth still full of food, “but Princess Sofia hates tamales. I know, she’s wrong.”

Pip chewed his lip. “I may also dislike spice.”

Elena swallowed her mouthful. “No! Pip!”

“I’m sorry!” he said, holding his hands up. “Don’t hate me! I think it hides the delicate flavours!”

“It *is* the flavour!” Elena retorted, half scowling, half laughing. “But I think it might take a lot more than that to make me hate you.”

Pip smiled, looking down. “What else do you know of Princess Sofia?”

“She’s nice,” Elena replied. As the daughter of a Baron, she and the Princess had moved in similar circles, although they’d never been more than acquaintances. “Well-read, *very* pretty. Why do you ask?”

“Just curious.” He frowned. “Have you met her?”

“Oh, only once or twice. A long time ago.”

“Right.”

He passed her another parcel, a small bowl of spiced beans, smothered in cream and herbs. Elena tried not to moan as he handed her a spoon.

“What do you think of your prince?” she asked him between mouthfuls. His question seemed the best chance she had of learning more about the mysterious young man. She didn’t even know what he looked like, let alone why Sparta might want him dead.

“Oh, he’s all right,” Pip replied, not meeting her gaze. “Why do you ask?”

Elena grappled for a lie, and found one easily. “I am trying to work out if he’s worthy of you.”

At this, Pip flushed. “He wants to be a good king,” he responded. “If that counts for something.”

“It does. But what does a good king look like, I wonder?”

“The sort that cares about his people and listens to them? I don’t know.”

He did not seem to want to talk about it, but at least she knew that the prince was now worthy of protection.

“The food is almost as good as you promised,” she said, finishing off her dish. “Almost makes up for your absence. Almost.”

Pip looked down at his feet, his hands neatly folded behind his back, as if he didn’t trust them not to betray something. “I wish I could promise you that it won’t happen again,” he said. “I wish I could promise to be here every night from now on, but I can’t—”

“It’s all right,” Elena told him, “I have to do as I’m bid, too.”

Pip’s discomfort did not lessen. “Let’s return to the stars, shall we?” he suggested. “Tell me some stories about them.”

*

Elena spent the next morning in her garage, eager to be anywhere other than the Baroness’ apartment. The place was practically spotless now, in better shape than it had been in years, but nothing to do there was still infinitely better than nothing to do in the cold, icy apartment.

She thought about calling in on Snowdrop and the others, but she had nothing to report and didn't feel that they were in that 'please just drop in for a chat' sort of place.

She didn't have anyone like that. No one she could talk to without an excuse.

Shortly before she was due to set out, she was startled by a frantic banging on the door. She looked up to see Clover, out of breath. "Things are getting a bit… *heated* near the square this morning," he rushed. "Snowdrop said to let you know so that you could avoid it."

"Oh, tell her I said—"

But the boy had already raced off.

Elena sighed, deciding she should probably head off before it got any worse. She could avoid the square if she went the back way. She gathered her belongings, locked the door, and turned the other way. Voices swelled in the distance, a discordant chant she couldn't hear the words of.

Just noise, always noise.

A van had parked across the road, blocking her exit. She waited a few moments patiently, hoping it would move. It looked to be unloading quite the haul.

She glanced at the clocktower. She really needed to be heading off.

She'd chance the square. She could always sneak around it.

Sharpening her resolve, Elena headed towards the square. It was surging with people and placards, all the way to the gates of the nearby plant.

“Let us in!” people screamed. “You’ve nothing to fear if you’ve nothing to hide!”

Not one of the guards responded. They stood in front of the gates and around the square as still as statues, immovable as rock. Elena wondered how progressed the experiments at the palace might have become. Maybe the guards were secretly metal too, with faces of painted wax.

A young boy—no older than thirteen—lifted an apple into the air, and hurled it at one of them. It smacked against her helmet.

The guard fired into the crowd.

In a second, people were moving. Some towards the boy—he’d fallen, he was bleeding, but he wasn’t dead—while most split off away from the scene as the guards fired more bullets into the air. Elena barely had any time to move. Someone sprinted from behind her, upsetting her balance, sending her spiralling into a nearby cart. Fruit shot into the street.

All this because of an apple.

Gunfire and screams twisted through the air. The ground shook thunderously. Hundreds of people stormed across the square in a grim cloud of colour. Elena righted herself, moving for the side streets, trying to find somewhere to shelter until the worst of it had passed.

A thin, bony hand fastened around her wrist. Elena tried to jerk away, not thinking about who it was attached to, just imagining the hands of a guard, or a dread doctor, or her stepmother…

"It's all right, girl," said a warm, gravelly voice. "I've got you."

Grandma.

Elena stopped fighting, allowing herself to be tugged into a doorway while the rest of the crowd ran screaming for cover.

"You keep your head down, girl," said Grandma. "This'll all blow over soon."

The screams echoed for a long while after the gunfire had ended, and looking at the woman's withered face, Elena wondered if any of this would ever be over.

*

She met Pip that night in the gardens. Though it had been several hours since she'd got caught up in the mayhem, the look of it hadn't quite left her face. She could feel it on her like a brand, a stain for all to see, and when Pip turned the corner of the hedge, his smile vanished instantly.

"Something happened," he said. "Tell me."

"There was another incident in the outer ring this morning," Elena told him, her voice whispery. "It was… a lot."

Pip coiled his fingers into fists, seeming almost as shaken as she was. He closed the distance between them and sat down

beside her. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” she said. “Just… shaken.”

“Do you live in the outer ring?”

“Technically, I live in the middle ring, but it’s very close. My workshop is in the outer ring. A garage not far from the coal plant.”

Pip shook his head, sighing as if he had more to say, but thought better of it. A few seconds ticked by in silence. “There is nothing I can do to help,” he said eventually, “but is there anything I could do to distract you?”

Elena paused. She could actually think of a great number of things Pip could do to distract her, but none of them felt appropriate and most of them were certain to make him blush. Not one of her initial thoughts could fix what had happened in the square earlier, but maybe…

This was her perfect chance, her chance to do a little more spying. They were fast running out of time. “I’d love to see more of the palace,” she said sweetly. “You know… a tour. You must know it fairly well by now.”

Pip smiled. “I’m sure I can arrange something. But I’ll need to get you a uniform if we’re to go anywhere but the workshops. You’ll stick out a bit in your current attire. Wait here.”

Pip disappeared for a moment, leaving Elena to contemplate what she’d just done, how quickly and how easily the lie had come. What was she doing? What information could she

possibly gain like this anyway? Pip wasn't going to stand by as she broke into various rooms. What was she thinking?

Maybe you just want to spend more time with him.

She shook her head. She *wished* that's all it was. At least then, her conscience would be clear.

Pip returned in a few minutes with a white and gold jacket matching his own, and a pair of slim-fitting black trousers. "I couldn't see any shoes, alas," he said, turning his back so that she could change. "Wasn't sure of your size anyway."

"Er, big," said Elena. "For a woman, anyway. I could probably fit into yours!"

"I will remember that next time I am procuring footwear for you to borrow."

Elena shimmied out of her oil-stained trousers and folded them neatly under the bench, hoping no one discovered it whilst they were gone. The jacket fitted well enough over her shirt and bodice, so there was no need to remove those. A part of her wanted Pip to turn around prematurely and catch a glimpse of her legs. They were one of the few unspoilt parts of her, free from burns and bruises, and she knew well that her thighs were shapely and pleasant to look at.

She regretted the thought almost as soon as it entered her mind. Was this really all she could hope for? That he'd one day see her *thighs?*

What else could he see?

He'd never see her in a pretty dress or with a face not covered by soot. And she was not about to strip herself completely naked and fumble with him out here in the open, either.

The thought made her flush.

"Are you ready?" Pip asked.

Elena buttoned up her trousers and smoothed them down. "Yes."

Pip turned around, smiling. He stepped towards her, pulling out a handkerchief. "You've a little something on your face," he said.

Of course I do.

"Let me just… wipe it off for you."

She knew she should tell him that she could do it herself, but she liked the feeling of his fingers on her face, the slow stroke of the silken fabric, how close he was standing to her. His eyes glistened like green glass. A little closer, and she'd been able to feel his breath. She *wanted* to be able to feel that breath…

"There," he said, stepping away. "All done."

Elena sincerely doubted that, but she decided to trust his judgement—to allow his view of her to be the real one. "Come on," Pip said, threading his hand into hers. "Let's go."

*

Elena quickly discovered that Pip knew his way around the palace well for someone who hadn't been there long. He knew how to avoid the other servants, all the exits and entrances, and the best way to stay clear of the guards. There was something impressive in his skill, and slightly devious—like he was the spy, not her.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked her.

Elena hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Um, the galleries, maybe?"

It was as good a place as any—she could hardly tell him to get her to the Queen's bedchamber and let her riffle through her things, trying to dislodge state secrets.

Pip beamed. "A good choice. This way."

Elena had been here before, of course, but it was a long time ago, another life. She couldn't help but stare as they walked, dazzled by the display of silver and gold, the ornate, painted ceilings, the stone turned to silk and gossamer under the majestic hand of a skilled sculptor. This was the only place in Petragrad where you couldn't hear the roving gears.

The gallery was something else entirely, painting after painting of living canvases, of sparkling eyes blossoming under paintbrushes, of the green fields and ancient forests of yesteryear blooming before her eyes. Elena wanted to inhale that beauty, to swim in it.

"Magnificent, aren't they?" said Pip, admiring one of the grand palace of Toulouse—a building of white stone and blue

turrets, surrounded by fields of bluebells.

“Yes,” whispered Elena, quite forgetting what she came for. It took her more than a moment to remember. “Is it a fair likeness? The palace one?”

“Very much so,” said Pip, almost wistfully.

“It’s beautiful.”

If this were another time, a line in a fairytale, Pip would have told her she was beautiful too, or promised to take her there one day. But he did not. It would have been falsehoods and lies, anyway, and she did not want them.

“Come on,” he said, taking her hand again, “there is more to see.”

They headed to the library next, Pip pointing out other areas of interest as they went. “The guest rooms are down there, along with a rather opulent swimming pool. The more permanent residents are further down in the East Wing—”

“Permanent residents?” Elena frowned, trying to make her curiosity sound light rather than probing. “Who lives here, other than the Queen and her mountain of servants? I daresay *they’re* not located in the East Wing.”

Pip laughed, light and musical. “No, alas. Would make more sense, wouldn’t it? Most of the bedrooms here are in complete disuse most of the time. But Prince Nero has a permanent room here, and a few other members of the Queen’s court. Ladies in waiting, General Bestiel too, I think…”

Elena nodded. That was information worth knowing. General Bestiel was Queen Mira's right-hand man. His quarters might well contain important information if she was ever brave enough to go in search of it.

They lost far too much time in the library, admiring gold-leaf pages and stunning calligraphy, before challenging each other to silly games like going to the first book they could find, turning to a certain page, and reading out the first sentence to create answers to made-up questions.

"How will the ball go?" asked Pip, tossing a book in her direction. "Page 84."

"Hmm. 'A hectic flush passed her cheeks'."

"That could be exciting."

"You try. Page 213." She passed him another volume.

Pip skipped to the correct place. "Oh dear," he said, face whitening.

"What is it?"

"It just says… *kabloom.*"

Elena's jaw tightened, remembering the last ball she'd attended. "Oh dear indeed," she managed.

"Are you all right?"

No, she thought. *Rarely. Never. But I won't let another explosion wrack these halls. I won't.*

"I'm fine," she lied. "Could we check out the ballroom next?"

That was probably not the best place to go, given the stark reminder flashing through her, but it had been a long time since then. She needed to see it again, get a proper look at its layout—build up a picture in her mind of where everything was. All information was good information.

Pip shifted uncomfortably from side-to-side. “The ballroom is in use at the moment,” he said. “We can watch from one of the balconies, maybe?”

Elena gestured to her clothing. “I wasn’t about to join them for a dance.”

Pip laughed. “All right. This way, then.”

Once more, his hand slipped easily into hers, dragging her out of one of the doors, along a corridor, and up a set of steps. She wondered how long it would take for her hand to grow used to the shape of his, and realised that it never would. He would be gone from her life before any of this felt normal to her.

She clutched his fingers tightly at the thought.

Pip led her to one of several balconies that overlooked the gold, gilded ballroom with its shining marble floor. Elena remembered staring at it as she huddled with her stepsisters under that table, how she’d traced patterns with her eyes as the room blazed with screams.

No one was screaming now. The room was filled with laughter. Bodies in glistening gowns and sharp waistcoats twirled about the space below in an informal dance. Other

courtiers hung at the sides twittering and gossiping, drinking and munching on after-dinner canapes.

“There’s the Yunasian emperor,” Pip pointed out. “His daughter beside him. Over there we’ve got the delegates from Ishmael. Duke of Veronia over there—can’t handle his drink.”

“They’re all so beautiful,” Elena sighed, once more forgetting her true purpose. It was easy to forget with Pip. Easy to forget almost everything.

“Really? Even the Duke of Veronia?”

“It’s the clothes and the atmosphere and wisps of *food,*” she admitted. “I think I should like to go a ball again.”

“Again?” Pip raised an eyebrow. “Have you been to many?”

Elena hardly knew why she didn’t just tell him that her father had been a baron. At first, she thought maybe she didn’t want to seem like she was boasting. But she suspected it was far more to do with not wanting him to see how far she had fallen.

“One or two, back in Navarra. Things were different there.” She did not elaborate, turning instead back to the party. “Where is the Prince of Toulouse?” If she was supposed to be protecting him, it would do well to learn what he looked like.

“I don’t see him down there,” Pip remarked.

Elena was about to ask for more information about him, when a door on one of the neighbouring balconies opened up, and a couple of fine ladies wandered out in swishing downs.

Pip grabbed Elena and pulled her to the floor, hiding behind the balustrade. He placed a hand to his lips, giggling slightly.

His shoulder pressed against hers. His hand did not leave her arm.

“Gosh, we’re awfully high up here!” gasped one of the ladies.

“Lady Grace,” whispered Pip, “one of the Queen’s ladies. And the other is Lady Helena.”

“A lovely affair,” said the second lady. “I shall be sorry when the others depart after the ball. They do keep things lively.”

“Plenty of time to have some fun with them yet,” Grace twittered. “I haven’t seen much of the Toulousian prince lately, have you?”

“I’m hardly surprised, if the rumours about his father are to be believed.”

Beside her, Pip went very still. The hand on Elena’s arm froze.

“I wouldn’t feel much like partying if my father were ill,” Helena continued.

“I’m surprised he’s not putting on more of a show of normalcy. Most of them would.”

“Hmm, he’s young. Perhaps he’s not yet learned. Not all princes are as cavalier as Nero!”

They collapsed into excited giggles, conversed for a few more moments about nothing in particular, and then decided to rejoin the rest of the party.

For a long while after they left, neither Elena or Pip moved. All traces of his smile had vanished.

“Is that true?” Elena asked. “Is the Toulousian king ill? How —how bad is it—”

If Sparta knew, then targeting his son made absolute sense. It wasn’t just a prince they’d be killing—but the future king. The political upheaval they would be causing would be monumental.

“I couldn’t possibly say.” Pip’s voice was quiet.

Elena wanted to kick herself for thinking first of the political impact, and not of the people attached to this man. The king might be beloved. Pip clearly seemed to like the Prince. No wonder he wasn’t here.

“The poor prince,” Elena said softly, “to be so far away from home during this time. When my mother was ill, I knew she was dying. I never wanted to be more than a few feet from the house, in case I missed saying goodbye.”

Pip stiffened.

“Pip? Are you all right?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That… that must have been a very hard time for you.”

“It was,” she said. “And thank you.”

“Did you say goodbye?”

Elena swallowed. “I was there, at the end, but there were no last words. Death like that… it is long and lingering. To this day, I am not sure what her last words to me were. Was it, ‘take care?’ ‘speak later?’ ‘love you, *mija?*’ It was something like that. Perhaps that is enough. To know that whatever she said to me, they were good words.”

Pip’s hand had found hers again, but his gaze was misted and far away. For a long while, neither of them spoke.

“I’m sorry,” Elena whispered. “That was very personal. If it made you uncomfortable—”

“No,” said Pip, clutching even more tightly to her fingers. “It isn’t that. I’m just… I’m very sorry for your mother. How old were you?”

“Twelve. Things were never the same after that. Nothing can be.”

“Of course not.”

Elena paused for a moment. “My father went more quickly,” she said. “Coal sickness. He seemed almost fine one day, and the next… the next we were calling the dread doctors to take him. He could barely breathe. I don’t… I don’t remember what his last words were.”

Pip’s arm circled around her, hugging her tightly. Elena leaned into that touch, into that gentle heat. “I didn’t know about your parents,” he said. “Are you alone now?”

“My father remarried before he died,” she said, voice barely more than a whisper. “I live with my stepmother and two stepsisters.” She paused. “Yes. I am alone now.”

Pip’s hold on her tightened, and they both sat there for a long while in a silence that could not be shattered.



"So, you learned nothing during your little tour of the palace? *Nothing?"* Snowdrop stared at Elena from the garage door, listening to her report with abject disappointment.

"Well, other than the king's ill health…"

Snowdrop waved it away, dropping into a seat nearby and groaning at the force it exerted on her leg. Her bots whirred around her ankles. "It's not your fault," she said. "And that *is* a useful point, I suppose. Offers motivation for the target, which we didn't have before, although if it's information everyone knows…" She sighed, leaning back against the wall and staring at the corrugated ceiling, looking much older than she was. "It's at times like this I wish I could just waltz into the palace myself…"

"You're welcome to don my ID card and a convincing disguise."

“No,” said Snowdrop sharply. “I can’t go in there. Not… not yet.”

Elena shrugged. “I’m sorry my spy skills aren’t up to scratch, but I’m very new at this, and—”

“Like I said, not your fault. We’re just… on a tight schedule here and I feel so damn *useless.”* She scrambled her fingers through her hair and sighed again, just as loudly. “Tell me more about this chap of yours—”

“He isn’t my—”

Snowdrop raised an eyebrow.

“Pip,” said Elena softly. “His name is Pip.”

“*Pip.*” Snowdrop snipped, adopted the stiff, clipped accent of the Toulousian royals. “A ridiculously common name. Half the Toulousians I’ve ever met were called Ed or Edwarde or Phillippe—”

“I think it’s a sweet name. It suits him.”

“Have you, er…” Snowdrop made a vulgar gesture that made Elena blush.

“Stars, no! We haven’t had the time—”

“It really doesn’t take very long…”

Elena squeaked. “I’m not very… that is to say…”

Snowdrop smiled. “Ah, yet to experience your sexual debut, have you?”

“I’ve had other priorities…”

“Want me to stop talking about it? We could turn the conversation back to tea and cake, if you like? The precise colour of his eyes? The way his smile makes you just melt?”

Elena couldn’t help but grin, and she didn’t want Snowdrop to stop. It was oddly nice, being teased, and she hadn’t had anyone to talk to about anything like this in so long—

A loud bang sounded from outside, followed by the loud cacophony of voices, dozens, hundreds, layered on top of each other. Elena turned sharply to Snowdrop. “Your people?”

Snowdrop’s face went white as ash. “No.” She climbed to her feet, double-checking her pistol and grabbed her makeshift crutch.

“You can’t go investigate, you can barely walk—”

“Then come with me.”

Elena hurried after her, locking her garage and moving towards the sound of the commotion. In the square nearby, something was happening. A crowd had gathered around the empty market, near the stage and the centre. Half a dozen guards stood on it, flanked by dread doctors, their black beaks casting sharp shadows on the deck below.

In the middle was a cowering, white-haired figure, skin pruned and wrinkled.

Grandma.

“*No.*”

Snowdrop stopped shortly behind Elena, sucking in a sudden breath. Elena wheeled around to face her, searching her eyes for instruction. Snowdrop only stared back.

“Citizens of Petragrad,” boomed one of the soldiers, “Eva Babanin stands accused of inciting rebellion, through acts of public preaching.”

Public preaching? Elena wanted to scream. *She told us stories.*

But her voice wouldn’t come, and her legs had turned to stone.

“How do you plead, Ms Babanin?”

Elena expected her to retort, or plead, or say something—anything. She had never known Grandma to take anything lying down. Yet her sharp tongue stayed silent, and even at a distance, Elena could see she was shaking.

She was afraid.

Old and ancient as she was—she did not want to die like this.

No one would.

Elena’s eyes darted about the square, looking for something to do, some distraction to cause, some construction to topple. At this stage, if she could, she’d explode something. She’d smash open a barrel of chaos if it got Grandma out of this.

She saw nothing.

“Do something,” she said weakly, turning back to Snowdrop.

Snowdrop’s face slowly cycled back to hers, and Elena realised she’d been doing the exact same thing—searching for a way out.

And Snowdrop, who was a hardened rebel, who’d probably been captured before, and shot at, and seen all manner of chaos and violence, had nothing.

“I can’t,” she said.

They both turned back towards the stage. Grandma was still cowering beneath the guard.

But she didn’t do anything! Elena wanted to yell. *She just ran for shelter. She didn’t even throw the apple. You must know she’s only an old storyteller—*

The reality hit her like a brick. Of course they knew. They hadn’t been able to catch the boy. They needed someone—anyone—to make an example of.

“The traitor has nothing to say,” the guard continued. “The punishment for rebellion is death.”

Elena’s body iced. She knew that was the sentence for treason, but she’d foolishly, dimly been hoping that they would make an exception.

Please, no, please, they’re just stories!

“Any final words?”

Grandma stared at the guard, and for a moment, her shaking subsided. Her voice carried over the crowd, strong and dark.

“May Mira rot in Hell.”

Bang.

The noise of the pistol sent a silence rippling through the crowd. Elena never heard the sound of Grandma’s body hitting the floor. It was like an explosion had ripped through the square, like she’d been knocked down, eardrums obliterated. A hard, painful ringing blasted through her ears.

Grandma was dead. And Elena had just stood there and watched her murder.

Something was happening. People were moving around her, a slow, surging tide, like she was pitching through the waves. She thought people might be screaming. Or shouting.

A hand clutched her arm, but the sensation didn’t fully reach her.

Something crashed. A van had been upended.

“Come on!” said Snowdrop. “We need to get out of here.”

Shots rang out. Three people had sprung from the crowd and were trying to wrestle a rifle out of the grip of one of the dread doctors. Another group had swamped the guard that held the pistol and were yanking it free—

Glass shattered. Someone had smashed the window of a nearby shop.

Snowdrop tugged harder.

“Elena! Come on!”

She dragged her down the cobblestone streets, limping hard on her crutch. More people mobilised, running out of their homes and shops, grabbing makeshift weapons, joining the fray. Some banged on garage doors, searching for entrances, pulling out fuel, rags, lighters.

No, oh no—

Elena could hear everything now, the screaming, the shouting, the smashing and grating, the gunfire blazing through the air, things—people—falling to the floor.

They reached her workshop. Elena’s fingers went for the lock, hands numb as she turned the code. They ducked in, shutting it tightly behind them. Elena stared at her grease-filled sanctuary, wondering if she should grab a weapon to defend it, or hide and let people take whatever they wanted.

I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die, I don’t want to die.

“Why would they do that?” she whispered in the dark.

Snowdrop breathed, long and hard. “She was one of us,” she replied. “Grandma. Well, an ally, at least. They must have found out. Didn’t have any evidence other than her stories… But they needed someone. To execute. To send a message.”

“I’m not sure people heard it.” She swallowed. “Why did we run?”

“I can’t fight right now,” Snowdrop continued. “And you don’t want to.”

Elena wasn't sure that was true. She *did* want to fight—to make someone pay for Grandma's death. But she also didn't want to get hurt.

You cannot have it both ways.

"A riot isn't a battle anyway," Snowdrop continued. "It isn't something you can win."

"They were smashing shops. Shops that belonged to their neighbours—"

"And they'll do a lot more—and a lot worse—before the day is out."

Someone banged on the garage door, checking the lock. Elena flinched, but Snowdrop clicked at her bee-like bot, and it flew under the gap to attempt to stab the interloper's foot, and they decided it wasn't worth their while trying to break in.

"What—what will happen now?" Elena asked, hugging her arms. For some reason, she was no longer warm enough in her jacket.

Snowdrop shrugged. "Looting, breaking, shooting, killing. Reinforcements will be here soon. They'll send every armed guard, soldier and dread doctor they have, and they'll stamp out any flames in a matter of hours. There's more of us than them, but it won't matter. They're trained, they have weapons, and they'll kill whoever stands in their way."

"And… what do we do?"

"Stay out of sight," Snowdrop said. "Wait for this to blow over." She moved to the back of the garage and found the

kettle. “I won’t make it half as well as your Toulousian boy,” she announced, avoiding her gaze as she rummaged around the tin there, “but would you like some tea?”



The sound of breaking and rumbling continued for almost an hour, shrieking through the corrugated metal and the cold stone of the floor, only to be mowed down when the reinforcements arrived—guards and tanks, heavy, metal footprints, voices that ought to have been human but transformed into something else with volume and cold indifference. It was an earthquake of noise, like the ground itself was screaming.

And people screamed, too. For louder and far longer than they had that awful day at the palace.

Don’t think about that. Don’t think about that.

Elena turned to Snowdrop, nursing her third cup of weak tea. Her face was paler than milk.

“They say that rebels killed the last king of Petragrad,” Elena said quietly, fracturing the barrier of silence between them.

Snowdrop stiffened. “That’s a lie.”

“I thought so.” Another minute ticked by between them. “I was there the day he died. My father was a distant relative of

his. When we first came here, we received an invitation to the ball. My father hoped the king might help us. If he hadn't died, so much would be different…"

Snowdrop's gaze flickered darkly. "For us, maybe," she said. "Everyone else would have died in the smoke and the dirt just the same."

Elena hugged the cat-like bot tightly in her arms. "Us?" she said. "How did your life—"

Snowdrop stood up. "It's quieter, now," she reported. "I need to get back to my own place. The others will be worried —maybe wanting to mobilise."

"And do what?"

Snowdrop paused as Elena unlocked the door. "We won't be taking on the Queen's army today, but we might have some new recruits." She looked back at Elena. "Stay here," she instructed. "It still isn't safe."

When Snowdrop left, Elena crawled under her workbench, tracing the lines of the star-cross. She was fourteen years old again, hiding under the table in the ballroom, the world exploding around her. This time, there was no Ivanka to keep her company, no Mariah, no father searching through the throngs to find her.

No one was coming for her, and no amount of tracing the star-cross and mumbling prayers would convince her that she wasn't totally and completely alone.



Something had happened. No one was telling them what, but Pip could feel it. Most of the palace guards had disappeared, and those remaining were casting furtive glances, whispering quietly whenever they passed each other in the corridors.

Lucia could see it too. The rest of the courtiers seemed to remain oblivious.

“Theories?” she asked Pip over afternoon tea, a decadent affair served outside on the lawns, with towers of china plates filled with tiny finger sandwiches, hot scones, and miniature cakes. A Toulousian specialty. He pocketed a couple for Elena later.

“I feel that it is perhaps not best to speculate,” he remarked. There was something grim about the atmosphere, like the gathering before the funeral. Whatever had happened, he felt it was something bad. Theorising felt too close to fun, and he didn’t want to enjoy himself if people were hurt.

“Hmm, perhaps not,” Lucia said, dropping a fresh strawberry on her tongue and sucking off the powdered sugar slowly.

The still, quiet fear that had been nestling inside of Pip all morning wriggled and squirmed. “What are your plans for this afternoon?”

“A walk about the gardens, a sojourn in the library, perhaps a nap?”

“Could you do me a favour?”

Lucia raised a manicured black brow. “Most likely, but I would know what it is, first.”

“Can you cover for me? Say I’m spending the afternoon with you?”

Lucia smiled. “Intriguing. You owe me gossip, dear Pip.”

“I hope to give it,” he said, hardly knowing if that was the truth.

“Then go ahead. I’ll send out a search party if I don’t see you at dinner.”

“Thank you.”

Pip located Susan hovering nearby and let her know of his supposed plans, before returning to his rooms to pick up the servant’s livery he’d not *quite* got around to returning. It was an excellent tool to explore the palace and blend into the background…

And meet with Elena, of course. He knew he should probably just tell her who he really was. His disguise was an outright lie, at this point, and they'd nearly been caught a number of times. Usually, he detested dishonesty. He couldn't fathom why he'd slipped so easily into this lie—

He thought of Elena's dark eyes, glossy and searching, and realised he knew exactly why. He did not want to lose that look.

He did not want to lose *her*.

He tiptoed down to the workshops again, glad of the quiet, and pressed open the door. He wasn't sure if he could just waltz in right now. Just because Elena hadn't recognised him, it didn't mean one of the other mechanics wouldn't. Some were permanent members of the staff who lived in the palace.

No one raised an eye to greet him when he opened the door a crack, all engaged in their work. His heart lit up hopefully, gaze falling to the back of the room—

And landing on Elena's empty chair.

She wasn't there.

He closed the door, hovering in the corridor, refusing to give in to panic, not just yet. Perhaps she was in the bathroom, and would be back momentarily. Maybe she was just taking a break. She was fine. She was definitely fine. She *had* to be fine.

But she didn't come.

Finally, Pip turned down the corridor and located the office belonging to the supervisor. She was reading something at her desk, a novel with a faded pink cover of a couple embracing. Her eyes didn't look up.

He knocked loudly on the door.

She gasped loudly, leaping up from her seat. Her eyes widened at his face, and then frowned at his attire. Evidently, she *did* recognise him.

"Ah, your highness!"

"Are you the supervisor?" he asked. "I'm looking for one of your mechanics. Elena. She was, um, doing a personal job for me." Pip found himself amazed at his own mouth's capacity for betrayal, how easily the lie rolled off his tongue. He was becoming accustomed to it, and he did not like it.

The supervisor blinked. "She didn't come in today," she said shortly.

"Was she due time off?"

"No. But I know she works in the outer ring. She may have been caught up in the rioting this morning."

Pip's very blood froze. "There was a riot in the outer ring?"

"Some traitor was executed, some people revolted. I hear it's all under control now."

Then why isn't she here?

"Was anyone else hurt?"

The supervisor shrugged. “Probably. I haven’t seen the casualty report. Maybe ask the General, if you’re interested.”

Pip was not. He wasn’t interested in the General’s report, because at best, he’d have a list of numbers, and estimation. Nothing that would let him know if Elena was all right.

Pip schooled his face into a mask of rigidity. “Thank you, Madam, you’ve been very helpful.”

Pip returned to his room, thoughts blazing, hardly making any sense at all. He’d seen Elena come into work after trouble in the outer ring before. He suspected—but wasn’t sure—that money was an issue, that this job was important.

If she was all right, she’d be here.

And she wasn’t here.

He couldn’t contemplate staying in the palace and waiting for her to show up. The very thought made him sick to his stomach. How was he to eat and sleep, not knowing if she was all right? How was he to *breathe?*

He went to his wardrobe, selecting a cloak, and then found his stash of coins that Susan kept hidden. He wondered if he should take a weapon. It seemed foolish to rush off without one, but at the same time, was going armed inviting trouble?

In the end, he just took the plainest dagger he could find. He was uncertain of his ability to wield it next to the possibility of pistols, but it gave him a modicum of comfort.

With security so light inside the palace, it was easy for him to sneak away to the gates unnoticed, but there was no way to

descend into the city without detection.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said to the guard manning the lifts. “I need to get into the city.”

The guard blinked at him. “Ah, Prince Phillippe!” he said, dropping into a hasty bow. “I’m afraid I’ve been told not to let anyone descend. Queen Mira’s orders.”

“I am hoping I can persuade you otherwise,” he said, dropping several gold coins on the desk in front of him. He tried to do it slowly, waiting for the gleam in the guard’s eyes that suggested his price had been reached. Surely enough, it came. “I would prefer it if you told no one that you saw me,” Pip said as the guard shoved the coins into his pockets. “But if you must, you can always say I threatened you.”

“Right you are, Your Highness,” the guard said swifty, opening up the gates and directing him towards the lifts. “Um… don’t wander far. Stay away from the outer ring. Lots of problems there today.”

“I’ll be careful,” Pip insisted, knowing that he wouldn’t be. If Elena was in trouble… he didn’t want to think about the levels of ‘not careful’ that he would stoop to.

He clutched the dagger tightly under his cloak, praying he wouldn’t have to use it, that she’d be fine—

The lift descended through the bank of cloud, the city racing up to greet him, but Pip was too lost in his thoughts to notice anything until the glass doors slid open, and he stumbled out onto the smoky streets.

Security was not interested in anyone getting out of the palace, and it was easy to get by them, to disappear into the crowds. It was busier than Toulouse, the buildings taller and more tightly packed, swirling with smoke. Toulouse was white and silver, Petragrad copper and bronze. Not an echo of the palace's splendour stretched this far.

He knew it could take hours to get to the outer ring on foot, but luckily the trams were still in operation—at least to a point. He caught one to the edge of the middle ring where it spat him out in the dust and dirt, and Pip found himself strangely alone.

He followed the signs towards the outer ring, but he might as well have followed the signs of silent chaos. Shop windows were smashed in, military vans upturned, markets torn down. Scorched marks brushed the brick. Not a single building seemed to have escaped destruction of some sort.

Guards still patrolled the streets, and Pip was careful to avoid them. A few other souls were out too, sweeping glass and debris. No one spoke. No one dared to.

Pip wandered further down the streets, looking for the garages near the plant that Elena had spoken of, realising there could be dozens spread out all over the place. This was a foolish endeavour. He should never have come.

Finally, he stopped to ask for directions, asking a solemn-looking shopkeeper with a broom if he knew of a Navarran mechanic called Elena who worked out of a garage.

“Never thought to ask her name, but there’s a girl fitting that description a couple of streets over,” the man reported. “Row six, I think. Or seven. Maybe eight?”

Thanking the man, Pip followed his directions until he came to the garages. They were numbered, with six and seven facing each other. Some were named, with business logos smeared across the closed doors, but if Elena had named her business, she hadn’t seen fit to disclose it.

She might not be here, of course. She could be at home, recovering from her ordeal. This might be an entirely wasted journey.

He should have gotten her address from the supervisor.

You’re an idiot, Pip.

Susan would be furious. He prayed she never found out.

“Elena!” he called, in a soft, whispered shout. He rapped on a couple of the unnamed garage doors. There was no answer.

The shopkeeper could have been wrong, of course.

“Elena!” he called, more loudly, running down the street.

One of the doors rolled up, and her beautiful, engine-grease stained face rose out of the gloom.

“Pip?” she questioned, eyes widening. “What are you doing here?”

Pip didn’t answer. Instead, he ran towards her, unfolding his arms and yanking her roughly into his chest, inhaling the scent

of soot and oil and *her*. She was all right. She wasn't hurt. She was here.

Elena didn't protest at how roughly he'd grabbed her. She seemed to melt into his arms, shrinking several sizes.

"They killed her," she whimpered into his jacket, her fingers balling into his clothes.

Pip's blood chilled. "Who?"

"Grandma. Not… not my grandma… just… just this old lady that used to tell stories… and the queen's soldiers killed her… shot her in the square… then everyone else, everyone else they…"

She started to sob, quietly at first, and then louder and louder, like a river breaking through a dam. She sniffled and choked, gulping air. Pip steered her back inside, navigating her into a chair, trying to close the door one handedly but not wanting to move away from her. Not daring to. He held her for what seemed like hours, until there could not have been any liquid left in her.

Mira did this, he thought. Not the soldiers, not the rebellion, not the riots. A person. A person had broken Elena. A person he'd smiled at and taken breakfast with this morning, and who would be expecting him at dinner in a matter of hours.

It was the first time he could remember wanting to hurt someone.

Slowly, eventually, Elena's sobs subsided. Pip handed her a handkerchief with which to dry her face. It looked bitterly out

of place here, all silk and lace.

“I’m sorry,” said Elena.

Pip smoothed back a lock of hair from her face, finger catching on an errant tear. “What are you apologising for?”

“For being such a mess—”

“I don’t think you should apologise for having a completely logical reaction to witnessing an execution and being caught up in a riot, but there you go.”

“Wouldn’t you apologise?”

“Of course, but I’m Toulousian. We say sorry for everything.”

Elena half-laughed, half-sobbed. “How did you find me?”

“Luck, mostly. A fair bit of nerve, too.”

“Will you get into any trouble—”

Pip thought of Susan and the platter she’d have his head on if she found out he’d left the palace. “Oh, someone’s covering for me, I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Are you lying?”

“Only about one of those things.”

Elena sniffed into the handkerchief. “Thank you for coming to find me. You didn’t have to.”

“I really did.”

Elena’s eyes—somehow greener for the crying—lifted to his. Her entire face seemed moon-bright and soft, and Pip

wanted more than anything else in the world to press his lips to hers and kiss away her tears.

She's just been through a traumatic event, he reminded himself, *this is not your moment.*

And if he kissed her now, would he ever let her go?

He pressed his forehead to hers instead, his fingers winding into hers. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I… I think so." She breathed against him.

"Tell me what happened," he said. "If you can."

Little by little, Elena recounted the events of the day, her voice impossibly quiet. Pip's heart shuddered as she led up to the shooting, and died a little as she explained what had happened afterwards, how she'd crawled away into her workshop and waited for it all to be over. He wasn't used to this; he wasn't used to hating the world and he wasn't used to feeling someone else's pain as keenly as his own.

"And you've just been sitting here, all day, all alone?" he asked when she was finished.

"Not for all of it," she clarified. "I had a friend with me at first, but she had to leave."

Pip was grateful that she'd had someone, but he was equally annoyed that this friend had deserted her… and also privately relieved said friend was a *she.* He was fairly sure Elena preferred men.

“Why did they kill her?” he asked. “This woman? Grandma?”

Elena’s lip trembled. “They said it was because she told *stories*.”

Pip frowned, not understanding. How could anyone be executed for *that*?

“Religious ones,” Elena clarified.

It still took Pip a moment to understand, before his mouth widened in a silent, ‘oh.’ Public worship was illegal in Petragrad. Illegal in most of the Mechanical Kingdoms, actually, although he’d never heard of anyone being prosecuted for it in Toulouse or—

Navarra, where it was widely accepted, even encouraged. They still had functioning temples were people gathered, songs, books, symbols—

“That’s how you knew her, isn’t it?” he started carefully. “Her stories. You listened to them.”

“Inhaled them,” Elena went on. “They were an echo of home. How could I not?” Her eyes trembled. “You won’t report me, will you?”

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” he said. “And even if you had? No. No, I wouldn’t.”

Elena smiled, weak and watery. “Thank you.”

Pip hated that she even had to ask, but of course she did, because she’d seen the consequences first hand and, despite

whatever he felt in his chest, that strange, wordless feeling, like he'd known her forever—logic reminded him that he hadn't. He did not know her, and she did not know him.

Not yet, anyway.

"I don't believe that anyone has the right to tell anyone what they should and shouldn't believe," he went on. "But I'm curious—why cling to your faith? After everything that has been done to you? After all you've lost?"

Elena looked up at him. "Because it was the one thing that couldn't be taken from me."

Pip nodded, wrapping his arms around her once more. "Come on," he said. "Let's get you home."



THE BARONESS AND THE CONFESSION

Pip put his arm around Elena and allowed her to steer him back through the cobblestone streets toward her apartment just outside the outer ring. It was an ugly, coal-stained building where everything from the stone to door fittings seemed worn, frayed and rusty. Everything creaked or shuddered or peeled.

The elevator wasn't working, although that didn't seem to surprise Elena. "You can go, now," she said. "You don't need to walk me to my door."

Pip glanced up the long, rickety stairs that folded around the elevator. "How high up are you?"

"Pretty high."

"I'd like to take you to your door, if I may."

"I'm strong."

"You've not eaten all day. I'm not sure I could climb that high and I had a delightful afternoon tea."

Elena bit her lip. It occurred to Pip that perhaps she might not want to give away her exact address. That hurt, a little, but he didn't let it show. It was safer to be suspicious, after all. "If you really don't want me to—"

"You can take me to my door," she said. "Just… don't come inside."

"All right," he said, offering his arm once more.

Elena clung to it as they climbed, slow and steady, her body shaking. He wished he could come inside with her, get her something to eat and drink, help her into a seat, be perfectly assured that she was safe. But surely her stepfamily would take care of her. Maybe that's why she didn't want him to come in. She didn't want too many people fussing over her.

Eventually, they reached Elena's apartment.

"This is me," Elena said, pausing at a mahogany door with a little brass number plate reading '28'. She did not move to open it.

Pip turned to face her, his hand sliding from her arm to her fingers. He didn't want to let her go. He wanted to grab her hand and run away with her to somewhere quiet and safe and peaceful, and even though he was sure such a place didn't exist, it might be possible to find it if he could just hold onto her hand a little longer.

"Elena," he started.

Her eyes shone, almost level with his. There was no trace of her tears now. Her lashes fanned shut, her face gliding towards

his. Pip moved unconsciously towards her, noses brushing—

The door opened with a bang. A gaunt, pale-faced woman stood behind it, black hair scraped into a harsh, elegant bun on the top of her head. Her lips and nails were bright red. She glared at Elena, although her expression softened slightly on Pip after she took in his uniform.

"Dome above, child!" she said, looking back at Elena. "You're even more filthy than usual!"

Elena said nothing, staring at the floor.

Pip bit back a gathering retort. Was it possible that Elena's stepmother somehow hadn't heard about the riots on her doorstep, that she didn't know Elena had been caught up in them? Perhaps she thought Elena had been at work at the palace and had escaped the whole incident. That would make sense, given his uniform—

"Elena was caught up in the riots this morning," he said. "I came down from the palace when she didn't report for work, to ensure that she was all right."

Beside him, Elena froze.

Her stepmother's eyes narrowed. "You didn't go to work today?"

"I couldn't—"

"The rioting stopped hours ago," her stepmother snapped. "What have you been doing all of that time?"

"I—"

“Mother,” said a tall, black-haired girl behind her, around the same age as Elena but with nothing else in common, “I’m sure Elena was just getting on with other commissions at her workshop whilst she waited for the streets to clear—”

“*What* other commissions?” she hissed. “I know every commission she undertakes. Her logbook is clear whilst she’s working at the palace.”

“I’m… I’m sorry,” Elena whispered. “I couldn’t—”

“None of your excuses! We’ll have lost a day’s wages because of your ineptitude—”

“I am sure that Elena, being so gifted, will have no problem catching up tomorrow,” Pip interjected. “I’ve scarcely seen such a hardworking or skilled mechanic. I am sure the Crown will be very understanding as to her absence, given that the riots were *not her fault.*”

Her stepmother’s attention finally focused on him. “And who might *you* be, exactly?”

“I’m—Pip,” he said, stopping himself from using his title at the last moment. He’d never been more tempted to use it in his life. It was almost certain to shut her up. “I’m a servant from the palace.”

“Toulousian?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you speak for the Crown?”

“I assure you,” said Pip through gritted teeth, “you will be no worse off for Elena having missed a day. Now, perhaps we better let her get inside? She’s not eaten all day and is looking rather pale.”

Elena’s stepmother glared, her eyes two steely shards. Her face softened; her eyes did not. “Of course,” she said. “What were we thinking? Come along, Elena. Let’s get you inside.”

A claw-like hand slid along her shoulders. Elena bristled under it, as if the contact hurt her. She cast a final, almost desperate look at Pip—

And then the door closed in his face.

Pip was left alone in the corridor, alone with his thoughts and his tight, burning heart. He wanted nothing more than to kick down the door, sweep Elena into his arms, and carry her off to Toulouse where nothing would ever hurt her again.

It was stupid and foolish and ridiculous. He wasn’t strong enough to kick down the door. He didn’t think he could sweep her into his arms. He would never be allowed to take her to Toulouse with him—

And yet standing here whilst she was inside with those people who cared more about money and missed wages than *her* seemed far more impossible.

He placed his hand to the door, before doing what he had done for most of his life—

Absolutely nothing at all.



The attempt at softness vanished from the Baroness' face the second the apartment door closed. Her bony hand fastened around Elena's wrist. She yanked her into the kitchen, flinging her into the room with such force that Elena fell to the floor.

It wasn't hard. She had so little energy in her to resist. Even when she was well-fed and well-rested, she'd never fight back.

And the Baroness knew it.

"Filthy, ungrateful urchin!" she hissed.

Mariah squeaked from the next room, inching forward, but Ivanka held her back.

"Bringing that boy here to scorn us—" the Baroness continued.

"He was just walking me home—" Elena protested.

"Something wrong with your legs? You've walked these streets a hundred times before! You've never once needed an escort. You were just trying to embarrass me—"

"Maman," Ivanka whispered, coming forward, "we're all so very tired today—"

"Tired? *Tired?* You don't know the meaning of the word!" The Baroness was shrieking now. "You don't know what it's like, having the weight of a family on your shoulders, having

to organise everything, pay for everything—the responsibility is something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy! Do you want us to *starve,* Ivanka? To lose our home? To be crawling around in the coal dust?"

Ivanka fell silent. Mariah shook beside her, almost weeping.

"Don't you dare cry, child!" the Baroness railed. "That will do no one any good. And you always look terrible when you cry."

Mariah's bottom lip trembled, her blue eyes large and glassy. She caught Elena's gaze for a couple of seconds… and then turned on her heels and ran.

The Baroness sighed. "See?" she said. "Now look what you've done, Elena. It was such a relaxing evening before you came back."

Came back. Not came home. It was not her home, no more than the mops were at home in a cupboard.

Elena slowly rose to her feet, avoiding the Baroness' glare.

"Get in your room," the Baroness said quietly. "No food. We've little to spare, and we'll need to cut corners to make up for your loss. Get to bed immediately. You better be out first thing in the morning."

Elena nodded, and turned away towards the small, cramped quarters that acted the part of her room. She pulled off her boots, brushed some of the dirt from her skin, and crawled under her thin sheets. Every part of her was sore. Her head pounded.

When the Baroness had first started acting so cruel towards her, Elena told herself that it wasn't her fault—she was just grieving her husband, lashing out at anyone. She didn't mean it. It would stop, soon. All Elena needed to do in the meantime was be good and keep her head down.

When the Baroness started becoming more aggressive, throwing and breaking things when she didn't get her own way, pinching Elena to hurry her up, poking her daughters with a cane to get them to sit and stand and move like ladies, Elena told herself that even if this is who the Baroness was now, Elena was no better if she fought back. She wasn't like that. She wasn't angry or mean or violent. Nothing could make her so.

But now, lying in her cold room, stomach empty, mouth dry, body aching from exhaustion and mind flayed from everything else, Elena wondered if not fighting back was the worst thing she had ever done.



Pip had no idea how he made his way back to the palace after the events at Elena's place. He suspected it involved another bribe. He could not be sure. All his thoughts were condensed beneath a flattened, seething rage, the likes of which he had never known before.

When Elena had said she was alone in the world despite having a stepfamily, he'd assumed they were just distant, or that they were kind to each other but didn't know each other well, had different interests. Elena exuded kindness. How could it not bounce back towards her? People should have thrown kindness around her like confetti.

For her stepmother to behave in such a way towards her had been unthinkable.

And you left her there.

He didn't just hate her stepmother. He hated himself.

Somehow, Pip made it back to the palace and towards his rooms. He was late for dinner, but not dreadfully so. He doubted Lucia had sent out the alarm just yet. There was still time to change and head downstairs, although how he could possibly act normal again after what he'd just seen—

He clicked open his door and slid inside, heading immediately to the wash basin to rinse his face. He was covered in grime, his skin thick with it.

"Good evening, Prince Phillippe."

Pip jumped. Susan was sitting in the large wingback chair by the fire. "Ah! Susan!"

"You." She glared at him, her voice venomous. "Where have you been?"

"With Princess Lucia, as I said—"

“You have not been with Princess Lucia!” Susan hissed. “On account of the fact I found her kissing a rather fetching young servant girl in the library an hour ago.”

“Oh.”

“*Oh*? Phillippe Edwarde Alexander II, if you don’t tell me where you’ve been in the next three seconds, I will march you straight back to Toulouse and make you explain yourself to your mother—”

“I’m quite sure she—”

“And your grandmother.”

Pip’s throat bobbed. “I’ll tell you,” he said, “but you have to promise not to be too mad.”

Susan pursed her lips. “I make no such promises.”

Pip supposed that was to be expected. “I… I’ve met someone. A friend.”

“You met a friend?”

“I’ve met someone who’s become a friend and I was with them today.”

Susan narrowed her eyes. “And is this *friend* of yours pretty?”

“I fail to see why that’s relevant.”

“That’s a yes, then.”

Pip thought of Elena’s dark, green-flecked eyes and her soft-looking lips and the smell of her skin under the oil and cinders. *Because* of the oil and cinders. Her generous figure

had not escaped his notice either. It had been agony in the gardens the other day, imagining her changing behind him, desperately trying not to imagine her thighs wriggling into those trousers…

"She's a lovely person, Sue. That's really all that matters. And she was in trouble—"

"Trouble?" Susan's voice pitched. "What kind of trouble?"

"Er, she got caught up in a riot in the outer ring—"

"You went to the outer ring? During a *riot*?"

"After! *After* a riot!"

"How did you even get out—Wait, what was this girl of yours doing in the outer ring?"

"She works there."

"She works… *doing what?*!"

"She's a mechanic."

"A mechanic? You've fallen for a *servant*?"

"You're a servant, Susan, and you're worth ten of most of the nobles here!" Pip raged. "And I haven't fallen for her."

This Susan seemed to find even more incredulous than anything else. Her eyes were wide and livid, a vein throbbing in her temple. "Oh, you broke out of the palace—"

"*Bribed* my way out of the palace—"

"Lied to me, got Lucia to cover for you, and put yourself and your country in danger, for a *friend*?"

Pip paused, realising how all this sounded. "…I like my friends, Susan."

Susan did not seem convinced.

"I haven't had many friends, all right?" he added.

"You haven't had many lovers, either. I'm not surprised you can't tell the two apart."

"It isn't like that!" he insisted. "We haven't even… I mean, not that I haven't thought about it, I just…" He sighed, turning away from Susan and running his hands through his hair. "I really like her. I *care* about her. When I heard she might be in trouble… I just had to make sure she was all right."

Susan regarded him carefully for a moment, taking all of this in. Her lips were still paper-thin. "And how can you be sure she isn't using you? That this isn't some ploy for information, or just personal gain?"

Pip winced. "I… may have neglected to mention I'm the prince."

"You *may have*?"

"Um, I did. I did do that."

"And you're *sure* she doesn't know who you are?"

"Positive. I don't feel fabulous about doing it—I really don't—but no one, and I mean no one, has ever looked at me like she has. No one has ever looked at *me*."

Susan did not try to correct him.

“I know what you will say, that my family loves me and always will—that you do too—but sometimes you want someone to like you conditionally. You want to know that they *chose* to be with you. You. Not your crown or your title or your money, but you as you are—and that they’d stop loving you if you didn’t earn it.”

Susan sighed, looking like she’d aged about ten years. “She honestly has no idea?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And you’re not going to do anything foolish?”

“Define ‘foolish’?”

“Like run off with her, impregnate her, make her the future queen of—”

“Susan!” Pip said, aghast, trying not to think about each of those possibilities, or how nice and simple the world would be if they could just run off to Navarra together. He’d be absolutely terrible on a farm, but Elena would love it. Maybe he could run a farm shop, make excellent teas for the rest of his days. In the evenings when they were both done with work they could lie in the fields and stargaze and—

Oh. She really wasn’t just a friend.

“Just making sure. If it’s just going to be a simple affair—”

Pip coughed.

“—Or *friendship,* then keep seeing this girl, if it makes you happy. Only don’t you *dare* leave the palace again to see her.”

“You have my word.”

Susan rose from her seat, moving towards the door. She clasped Pip’s shoulder as she passed. “This will have to end, Pip. When we go home. And it will hurt. It would do to prepare yourself.”

“I know,” said Pip, something knifing in his chest. “It’s just… not being with her hurts more.”

Susan smiled wearily. “What’s her name, this girl who has captured your heart?”

“Elena,” said Pip, like her name was a musical note, “her name is Elena.”



Elena expected to be too tired to do anything but sleep when she fell into bed, but she woke several times in the night, coughing and choking, her dreams strangling her. She saw Grandma's body falling again, the *thud* she hadn't heard now beating like a drum, an empty, demented heartbeat. Her own seemed to taunt her.

Fire flashed through her dreams beneath the pounding feet of the dread doctors. She dreamt a shop splintered open and vomited out oil and gears. She dreamt the crowd melted into coal, which reformed again in the shape of skeletons—noiseless, faceless chattering maws.

All except one. A black, gooey skeleton wearing her father's face.

"Elena," the bones creaked, "*Elena.*"

It was a relief when the nightmares spat her out.

Her body felt hot and stretched, not quite her own. Her head was pounding, thoughts sluggish. But she couldn't return to

bed, and she didn't want to.

She dragged herself out, splashed water in her face, guzzled what felt like half the tap, and tried to force herself to eat a bit of toast. She should have been ravenous after barely eating at all yesterday, but everything tasted like ash in her mouth. Brick would have been easier to swallow.

She crept away before anyone could wake, crawling through the streets at the pace of a snail, silently amazed at how ordinary they looked, when she felt like the cobbles themselves should have been screaming.

It was a relief to get to work, to bury herself in the cogs and wires and gears and grease, even if her fingers weren't working like they usually did, and everything seemed to take longer. She could make the world vanish if she just kept working, and kept working, and kept working…

She'd forgotten why she was here, what she was doing. She was forgetting most things, anything that made sense. Even her own name was turning mushy and strange.

When she first set up her garage, when she earned the first coin under the counter, when she realised that one day, maybe, escape could be possible, she had told herself, *my name is Elena Hernandez, and I will get out of here.*

The first penny clinked in the canister.

But now she felt like she would never get out, that she wasn't even sure where she was supposed to be trying to go.

Lunch came and went. She survived on tea and nibbles of sandwiches. Tastelessness coated her tongue.

A smooth, soft hand brushed her shoulder. “Elena.”

Pip.

The world shifted back into focus, only for a moment. Pip slid onto the seat beside her, pulling her into his arms.

She set down her tools. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I came to see you, to check how you were,” he said, as if this were obvious. “You’re the last one here, you know. Everyone else has left.”

“They’ve gone early.”

“Apparently, someone gave them the evening off.”

“How nice of that someone…” Elena wanted to smile, but she couldn’t quite summon the energy. She slid out of Pip’s arms and lay her head against the desk.

“Tired?” he asked.

She nodded, mouth too sticky to speak.

Pip rubbed her back. She liked his hand there. She hoped he wouldn’t remove it. She wanted him to keep touching her and keep smiling at her and then maybe, *maybe* everything would be fine.

His expression sobered. “Your stepmother—” he started.

Elena flinched. She didn’t want to talk about her, but she couldn’t form the words to tell him that.

"—Is she always like that?"

Elena wanted to argue, wanted to disagree, to excuse the behaviour, to find *something* nice to say about her, something good. It was why she hadn't wanted him to come back, hadn't wanted him to see what her stepmother was like, how they lived, how she let her treat her…

But in the end, she could only nod.

"Elena…"

"It isn't forever," she said quickly. "Only until I save up enough money. Don't tell me to just leave. I *can't.* I've got nowhere to go. Not yet. But I will. Just a bit longer, just a bit longer…"

Pip sighed, looking grey and aged, like there were a thousand things he wanted to do or say but *couldn't.* How could he? There was nothing he could do. There was nothing anyone could do.

Except her. She could hang on just a little longer.

Pip's hand had not yet left her back. "I want to help you," he said eventually.

You can't. No one can.

You are, you are, you are…

Elena raised her head off her desk. It didn't feel right, to be vertical. Her brain felt like it was a cannonball, rolling off her neck.

"Pip…"

He cupped her cheek. “Yes?”

“I don’t… I don’t feel right…”

It was her last conscious thought before she pitched forward into his arms.



The room was spinning, and someone was screaming. There were people in the room, people and faces she didn’t recognise, horrible, hooded beaks…

The dread doctors, with their scanners and their machines, things beeping all around her.

She tried to move, to speak, but she couldn’t. Her limbs felt like lead.

“It’s not the coal sickness!” a voice screamed.

Pip.

She wanted to clutch at his voice, hold onto it like rain after a drought, but it slipped through her fingers.

Other voices were talking, other people. Someone in a white coat, and a person in grey council robes. There was movement, walls blurring around her. More shouting, hushed discussions.

In and out, she faded, bobbing on consciousness like water.

She drowned in dreams.

Home in Navarra, in the barn with her machines. Bronze horses nudged her cheeks. Her father smiled. Farmhands laughed. Her mother pushed her on a swing.

She skipped through meadows with her friends' hands in hers. Silken locks slipped through her fingers as she braided their hair. Ribbons and lace swirled through the air like butterflies.

Storm clouds rolled in. The fields turned grey. Her friends vanished.

She stood beside a tree, and fell down at her mother's grave. She traced the letters on the stone like it could pull her mother back to her, knit a little piece of her onto her soul.

But the stone was cold, and so was her mother.

The machines were sold. Tiny piles of coins stood where Elena's creations once sat. The house where love had bloomed withered like a plant, the colour shrinking from the walls, the stone puckering.

There was a wedding, a facade of warmth, then trunks that packed themselves and a long, long train journey to a city of smoke and metal.

And death, always death, circling over her like a raven of old.

She could not shake it, so she screamed at it instead.

Why why why? Why take them? Why was I spared? Why am I still here? What am I supposed to do?

“Live, Elena,” said a voice strangled with tears. “Just live. You don’t need to do anything else.”

But I want to, I want to. I have to, I have to.

“Take me home,” she whispered. “Take me home to Navarra.”

Even though she knew there was no going back, that her house wasn’t hers any more, that what she was chasing was a childhood long since past. No going back to that.

“It’s all right,” someone whispered, “it’s all right, Elena, you’re going to be fine—”

She wanted to believe that voice, but it sounded *good,* and she’d stopped believing in good a long time ago.

People were talking around her. She didn’t recognise them. Didn’t recognise anything but *Pip,* Pip beside her, holding her hand, stroking her hair.

They were discussing her. Where to take her. What to do with her. Pip demanded she stay where she was. They were calling him something. Something that wasn’t his name, but she couldn’t grab hold of the words long enough to make sense of it. Consciousness was a slippery demon. She wanted everything to vanish. All thoughts and feelings, all the tightness in her chest and limbs. Everything but *Pip.* He could stay.

She didn’t know how long she hovered in that place of pain and nightmares. From time to time, she was aware of things happening, of drinks in her mouth, of needles in her arm. The

feeling that stuck with her longest was the one of someone at her brow, applying something nice and cold, brushing her hair.

How long had it been since someone had touched her this way?

Don't go, she wanted to cry. *Don't go, don't go, don't go.*

But he did, of course. He had to.

He would have to go. Everyone always did.



Elena woke in a warm, soft bed, the mattress so deep she was almost swimming in it. The ceilings were unnaturally tall and painted to look like clouds brushed with gold. There was sky outside her window, too, bright blue, fringed with pink. Dawn, as gentle and natural as she could conceive it.

The room was filled with gilded furniture and plush cushions. Everything was ornate and beautiful, from the crystal flowers on the dresser to the dresser itself, the wooden feet carved to look like swans. Even the palace of Navarra could not boast such opulence.

She was in one of the guest rooms in the Petragradian palace.

Slowly, she turned her face towards the chair beside the bed. Pip was dozing in it, his ruffled shirt rolled up to the elbows,

his eyes closed, his dark lashes fanned over his cheeks. They were darker than his soft brown-gold locks.

Elena smiled, shifting up in bed and reaching for the glass on her bedside. She drank the entire contents, gasping for breath. She still felt groggy, but lighter than she had in days.

Pip startled in his sleep, bright green eyes blinking. “Elena.” He spoke her name like a prayer. He shifted off his seat and sat down on her bed, hands not quite touching her. Elena wished he would.

“What happened?” she asked. “Where am I?”

“You were taken ill. You’ve been out of it for three days. The doctors say you need to rest.”

Three days. She’d been asleep for three days? What Snowdrop must be thinking, or the Baroness—

“My stepfamily—” She struggled against the covers.

Pip pressed a hand to her chest. “They’ve been informed,” he told her. “And compensated, if that’s something you’re concerned about.”

He said the last part bitterly. Not at her—at the Baroness and her priorities.

“I’m surprised the Crown was willing to part with coin for a job I’m not doing. And… why am I up in *this* room? Surely there must have been somewhere else I could have gone…”

Pip looked down. “I pulled some strings,” he said, “and by that I mean I asked nicely. You get a lot done that way, I’ve

found. Besides, there were a lot of rooms going to waste. It wasn't hard to persuade them to let you have this one." His hand brushed her cheek. "You really worried me there for a moment. Initially there were some concerns that you might have had the coal sickness."

Elena shuddered, remembering the beaked faces hovering over her. "What would you have done if it was the coal sickness?"

"I don't know. Probably something stupid."

"I don't believe you're the type to be stupid."

"It's been a while since I have been, to be sure. Probably well overdue. At least it would be for a good cause."

Elena smiled, raising her hand to grace Pip's cheek. He looked worn, dark circles under his eyes. "You look terrible."

"Oh, *I* look terrible?" He laughed. "Sorry, the implication there was rude. Rest assured, I've never seen a person quite so ill look quite so lovely as you do right now, but there's a bitter irony in commenting on my appearance in your present condition."

"I don't look lovely."

"Oh," he assured her, "but you do. Covered in engine oil, white as a sheet, snotty and sniffly—you look lovely to me, dearest Elena."

His fingers caressed her cheek, brushing her temples. His touch felt like sunlight. "I like it when you say my name," she told him.

“I wish I could sing it. Commit it to verse. Sew it into the stars…”

“I’m not sure I do ‘Pip’ justice…”

“Well, it isn’t my full name.”

Elena frowned. “What is?”

Pip paused. “I already like how you say my name,” he told her. “I like everything about you, actually.”

Elena’s heart murmured in her chest. “I like everything about you, too.”

She wished she didn’t. She wished she could find something to hate, to latch onto, to dislodge this feeling deep inside her that made her feel like she would die when they came to say goodbye, but she couldn’t. He was welded onto her.

The door opened, and a sharply-dressed woman in grey robes shot into the room, holding a clipboard.

“It’s breakfast time and you need to—” The woman stopped, her eyes widening at the sight of Elena sitting upright in bed. “You need to go and get ready to serve it. Spit spot now, young Pip. We can’t be late.”

She smiled at the last bit, but Pip did not return it. He looked like he wished he could vanish this interloper into smoke. “This is Susan Dupont-Jones,” he explained to Elena, not removing his glare. “She’s the aide to the prince.”

“A pleasure to meet you. I’m—”

“Oh, I’m very much aware of who you are,” said Susan, grinning. “Pip? Miss Elena will be quite fine on her own. *Get to breakfast.*”

Pip stood up. “All right,” he said. He squeezed Elena’s fingers. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He gave Susan an irritated look as he was leaving the room, his lips pursed like he wanted to say something, but didn’t trust himself to stop at that.

Susan smiled smugly as he left the room. “Hello,” she said brightly. “I’m so glad to see you awake, Miss Elena. Young Pip was really very worried about you.”

Elena blushed. “You’ve known him for a long time?”

“All his life. Between you and me, I’m quite fond of the boy.”

“Why did he glare at you?”

“I imagine he’s worried that I might interrogate you in his absence.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Why indeed, hmm?” Susan crossed the room, smoothing down the bedcovers and lowering herself into Pip’s deserted chair. “How are you feeling, Miss Elena?”

“Much better,” she told her. “And it’s just Elena, please. Titles don’t really mean much anymore.”

“Is that so?” said Susan, an eyebrow raised. “How interesting.”

Elena folded her hands in her lap, not really sure what to do or say. Susan's mouth was smiling, but her eyes were sharp as steel.

"You're from Navarra, I hear."

"Yes."

"A long way from home."

"It's not by choice, I assure you."

"You came here with your family?"

She nodded. "My mother died before we left Navarra, and my father not long after we came here. I live with my stepfamily now." She paused, wondering what, if anything, Pip might have told her about them.

"And you're a mechanic, so I hear?"

"An engineer," said Elena. "Or… I'd like to be. One day."

"A humble dream."

"The best ones are."

Susan smiled.

"Forgive me," said Elena, "but how much longer must I stay in bed? My family—"

"Can spare you for a little while longer, have no fear. I think you need a few more days to recover fully. We'll ask the doctors later."

A few more days. The ball was rapidly approaching. If Elena didn't find information soon… "I hope the Toulousian

prince hasn't been inconvenienced by my illness."

Susan frowned. "Why would he be?"

"If Pip was, um, distracted at all. I imagine it must be difficult to be down a servant."

Susan looked down at her lap. "Rest assured, the Prince did not notice the absence of Pip."

Elena sighed. "That's a relief. I wouldn't want him in trouble because of me."

"You really like him, don't you?"

Elena sunk into the bed, turning over to hide her blush. "I know I shouldn't," she said, "but I have not been doing a very good job of stopping myself."

"And why should you stop yourself?"

"Because he will be going back to Toulouse after the ball, and I need to go home to Navarra."

"Back to what remains of your family?"

"To what remains of *me,*" Elena whispered, ashamed of the tears darting under her eyelids. She took a careful breath, trying to hide them. "I know that might be hard to understand —"

"Oh, I don't know," said Susan, "when you get to my age, most things are understandable, if you're paying enough attention." She got up from her seat, patting Elena's leg. "Let's see if we can find you some breakfast, dear. I daresay you're hungry."



A doctor arrived to check up on Elena shortly after she'd finished breakfast. She wished Pip had been the one to bring up the tray, but instead it was a Petragradian girl not far off her own age, who smiled knowingly at Elena as she laid out the steaming plate of porridge and honey. Elena wondered if Pip had been talking about her in the kitchens, and if so, what had he been saying? She did not want to be the source of gossip.

The doctor approved of Elena's progress, but prescribed another three days of bed rest and then "taking it easy"—an expression Elena was convinced was coined by the upper classes because who in the real world ever had that option?

He suggested Elena remain at the palace until the end of the week.

Elena's stomach coiled at the loss of time, worrying about Snowdrop and the rebels and the prince.

The *prince.* This could be an ideal time to learn more about him, and seeing as Pip couldn't remain beside her all day, she'd be able to sneak around as soon as she could stand.

Her heart lightened. Maybe there was a reason she'd fallen ill, a reason she'd been placed here. She was determined to make the most of it.

“I’m sorry I can’t stay with you,” Pip said that evening. “I’ve other duties to attend to, many of which I’ve been neglecting these last few days.” He bit his lip. “What did Susan say?”

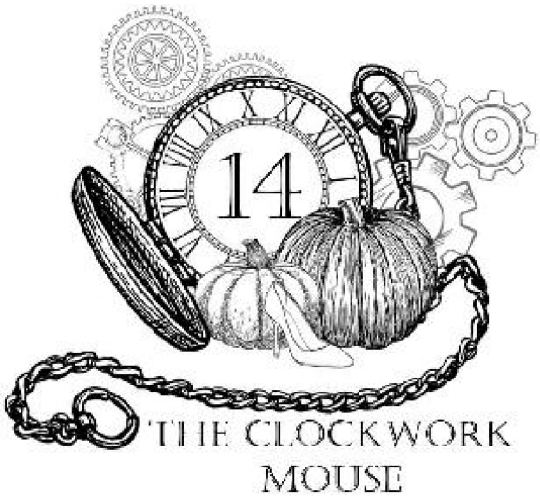
“Not much. I got the impression she was just trying to work out if she thought I was worthy of you. I hope I passed.”

Pip smiled, although he did not look relieved. He leant over and kissed Elena’s cheek, skirting dangerously close to her mouth. If she’d had a little more strength—and a little more courage—she’d have grabbed the lapels of his rather fine corset jacket and tugged him down into bed with her.

Her entire body flushed at the thought. It had been so long since she’d kissed anyone, let alone done anything more…

That was all a hot mystery to her, but one she was increasingly interested in solving.

“You’re worth ten of me, Elena,” Pip told her. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”



Watching Elena collapse had been the single most terrifying moment of Pip's life, followed only by the awful, wretched period waiting for the dread doctors to utter their verdict.

Only they didn't. The damned things didn't speak at all, passing their scanners instead to the doctor in white, who pronounced her clear. There was a diagnosis, at some point, but it basically came down to exhaustion. She was so tired that her body had broken, as surely as one of the automatons in her workshop.

Pip was not adept at hating people. Being afraid of them, sure. Wary, of course. Disliking—maybe. But *hating?* Hate was a new emotion.

And he felt it entirely towards Elena's stepmother.

He couldn't believe there was anyone in the world that could be so callous. He wasn't sure if she'd ever hit her stepdaughter—he didn't know what he would do if she had—

but she'd broken Elena as surely as if she'd taken a sledgehammer to her skull.

Waiting for Elena to wake up, even when the doctor assured him that she would, had been a unique kind of torture, worse when she cried out for someone who couldn't answer or begged him to take her home. Susan had forced him away from her bedside on several occasions, making him take part in meetings and festivities, partly to stop the servants from talking—and they would definitely be talking now, after his insistence that she be placed in the room next to his—and partly to distract him.

"You can't help her," she'd told him, "and I'm worried that you're going to hurt yourself."

But I can't leave her, he thought, *how can I leave her?*

It was almost worse now that she was awake, now that he could be with her, and could be making her laugh again, but was instead forced to sit through painful meetings and formal dinners.

"I hear your guest has woken up," said Lucia, dabbing the corners of her mouth with a napkin.

Pip groaned. "Does *everyone* know?"

"Everyone who talks to the servants. I imagine the rest of the guests might catch on soon, however. But they won't hear it from me."

"Thank you."

"Who is she?"

“A friend,” he said, though it felt a false, empty word compared to what she really was. “One of the palace’s mechanics.”

Lucia shook her head fondly. “People don’t act this way around their *friends,* Pip.”

“What do you want me to say, Lucia?” His knife and fork clattered loudly against the plate.

Lucia looked taken aback. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I only meant to tease, not to offend. I’ve never seen you like this over anyone before.”

“I never felt like this before.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know what to do, Luce.”

Her hand drifted over his. “Be honest with yourself,” she said. “And then with her.”

Be honest with her. If he told Elena the truth now, would she be angry? Would she immediately call things off? Or would she just become less herself around him?

I’d take your anger, he thought. *But not the rest. Please.*

“And when you’re ready,” Lucia continued, “tell me *everything.* I may not be Toulousian, but I do love *tea.*”

Pip laughed. “I’ll bear that in mind. Thank you, Lucia.”

As soon as he was able to, Pip slipped away and headed back upstairs. Elena was fast asleep. He sat with her for a little while, watching the slow rise and fall of her chest, before

slinking away to his own chambers. Susan was reading by the fire.

"A good evening, Prince Phillippe?" she said, not looking up.

"Rather dull, I'm afraid."

"Company not to your liking?"

"You know it wasn't." He paused. "I'm sure you're dying to pass judgement, Susan, so you might as well."

Susan put down her book, and looked him in the eyes. "She's either the greatest actress in the world or the second-nicest person I have ever met."

"Who's the first?"

"You, you silly boy."

"Oh."

"Obviously, it's still a terrible idea, but I think maybe it's one of those terrible ideas you just have to commit to. I think you are both likely to regret it more if you do not."

Pip helped himself to a glass of wine on his dresser, noticing a small box beside it. "What's in the box?"

"Contraception."

Pip spat out his wine. "*Susan*!"

"Most men have the implant, you know, but with you being so, well, *you,* we've never bothered to push you into getting one. But if you're going to take on a new lover—"

“Dome above, I do not need to hear this right now! She’s *bedridden!*”

“She won’t be for long, and anyway, I hear the bed is where most people—”

“Do not finish that sentence, do not finish that sentence, I beg you—”

“I’m just saying—”

“Stop. Saying. Anything.”

Susan laughed, rising from her chair at last. “As you command, Your Highness. Sleep well. I shall see you anon.”



For the next two days, Elena did exactly as she was told—absolutely nothing at all. She ate and rested. She read the books Susan procured for her. She played games of chess and let herself be waited on. She lived for the moments when Pip came. Sometimes, he’d whip out a pack of cards and challenge her to a game. Other times, he’d read to her. Sometimes, they did little but talk of nothing at all.

She had no way of contacting Snowdrop, but she did request that someone put up a note at her workshop “for her customers” assuring them that she would be back at work

soon, and even, at one point, penned a letter to Clara, Jane and Maribel.

"Just the one letter," she told Susan. "They can read it together. One is fine, right? I wouldn't be putting anyone out of pocket?"

Susan assured her that it was fine.

The Toulousians were *really* generous.

Of course, there wasn't much to put in the letter. She just wrote that she was sorry it had been so long since her last communication, that she was doing well, that she liked her new job at the palace and would be sad to see it ended.

I'll admit, a large part of me will be mostly sorry to say goodbye to Pip. I have never met anyone like him, and I doubt I ever will. I just wish I could scoop him up and keep him with me forever. I wish I could bring him home with me. Home to you.

It hurt to write much more than that, and she found the letter difficult to finish.

"Are you all right?" Pip asked that evening. "You seem out of sorts."

"I wrote a letter home to my friends today," she admitted. "I've not written to them in… a long while. For some reason, it left me feeling… strange."

Pip put down his book and took her hand. “You miss home.”

She nodded. “Today more than other times.”

“What would you like to do, when you get back to Navarra?”

“Exist,” she breathed. “Be. Live. Run through the fields, dance and sing. It doesn’t even matter if no one remembers me, if my friends have moved on, if all I have is graves and memories. At least I won’t have chains. At least I can be free.” Her throat caught, like a faulty gear unlatching in a mechanism. “I want to go home,” she told him. “I *need* to go home.”

Pip shifted onto the bed and pulled her into his arms. He made her no promises—he never did—but for a moment, she fooled herself into pretending that he could.



The next morning, Elena woke to a gorgeous brown-skinned woman standing over her, dripping with sun-shaped jewels. Elena was sure for a moment that she was still dreaming, and even closed her eyes again, certain the image would disappear.

The image coughed. “Good morning, Elena.”

“Princess Lucia!” Elena spluttered, immediately trying to stand, “What are you—”

“I hear the doctors have finally given you the go-ahead to be released from bed,” Lucia exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “I thought I might loan you a couple of my dresses? We’re a similar height.”

Elena glanced round, wondering why Lucia was being so generous, half expecting to see her stepmother in the corner ready to ridicule her. But there was no one, not even a maid hovering in the corner.

“Can you get up?” Lucia asked. “I can call someone if you need assistance—”

“I can stand,” Elena insisted, swinging her legs out of bed. She pulled herself into an upright position, refusing to wobble.

Lucia beamed. She walked over to the chaise beside the fireplace and whipped off a gown that had been draped there; a morning dress made of layers of soft emerald fabric.

“Luckily our colouring isn’t too dissimilar,” Lucia said, still smiling as if they had been friends their whole lives. “Go ahead—try it on.”

Elena took the gown and slipped behind a screen. “Forgive me,” she said through the panels, “but why is the princess of Firenze helping the guest of a servant?”

Lucia paused for a moment. “You mean… Pip?”

“Who else?” Elena asked. She tugged up the skirt. Lucia’s wide hips meant it fitted just fine, but the bodice was proving more difficult. She was terrified of ripping the sleeves—no way those were fitting over her bulky shoulders.

“Pip is very dear to me,” Lucia continued. “He has a certain something about him.”

Elena could hardly disagree, although she found it odd that a princess should be so familiar with the servant of another country. Then again, she wasn’t sure of the political relations between Toulouse and Firenze. Perhaps they’d been meeting since they were children.

Deciding there was no point dwelling on it—or struggling anymore with this dress—she stepped out from behind the screen, the sleeves still dangling below her breasts. “I can’t quite get them on…”

Lucia marched over, seizing the sleeves and looping them behind her back in some sort of bow. She adjusted the lace on the bodice and guided Elena towards the mirror. “There,” she said, “pretty as a picture.”

Although clean and presentable for the first time in what was likely years, Elena was less than enamoured with her appearance. Her short, choppy hair didn’t do the dress justice, she looked pale and tired still, and though the dress fit, she hardly looked like a princess.

Because she wasn’t. She never would be.

Lucia seemed to sense something was amiss. She steered Elena into a seat and wordlessly started brushing her hair. A ribbon was found, and the princess braided it into two plaits either side of her head and then pinned them up, giving the appearance of an elegant updo. “A fashion in Firenze,” she told her.

“You are good with hair.”

“I am a woman of many skills.”

“Thank you,” Elena said. “All this—you didn’t have to.”

“To be honest, you’re doing me a favour. I’ve been painfully bored for days.”

The door opened, and in came someone with a breakfast tray. Lucia made her excuses and left, leaving Elena alone once more. She demolished the thick, fat buns and the creamy porridge, and drifted around the room as she waited for the tray to be collected, testing her strength.

She felt better than she had done in years, and now that she was up, she knew she’d soon be sent home. If she was ever going to become a spy, today was the day.

She waited until Susan came to check on her and inquired as to what most of the royals would be doing in the morning, and if Pip would be busy attending to them. It was a busy day—a meeting, followed by refreshments outside, then a demonstration over in the barracks, followed by lunch.

Elena estimated she had three hours. Three hours before anyone noticed she was missing.

“Do you need anything?” Susan asked before she departed. “I’m happy to stay with you—”

“No, thank you, I’m fine,” Elena assured her. “Thank you, Susan.”

It felt wrong to be lying to a woman who had shown her so much kindness, but Elena reminded herself she was doing this to save Susan's own prince, and she would surely agree with her motivations, if not her methods, if she knew.

You could tell her, a voice inside suggested.

Elena would be lying if she said she didn't want to. She wanted to tell Susan, and she wanted to tell Pip, and she was almost sure that neither of them would report her, that they'd want to help…

But the niggling doubt remained, the uncertainty of what they'd be willing to keep secret.

She wasn't going to risk it. She *couldn't.*

She took a deep breath, and stepped out of her room. She knew exactly where she was thanks to Pip's tour a few days earlier. Unfortunately, she had no idea which room belonged to the Prince of Toulouse and, even if she did, she wasn't sure what might be in his chambers that might help her protect him.

No, if she was looking for intel on anything political, there was only one place she might be able to access where *something* useful might be kept.

General Bestiel's bedroom.

She didn't know which room was his, but unlike the guest wing, the contents offered quick clues once she reached the East Wing. She was thankful for the dress which made it easier for her to snoop in this part of the palace—she could easily

pretend to be a guest—but she had no idea what to do if she was caught inside his chambers.

Well then, said a voice that sounded oddly like Snowdrop's, *just make sure you don't get caught.*

The first couple of rooms were filled with dresses and floral arrangements: likely the rooms belonging to Queen Mira's ladies. Elena was almost certain that they'd have nothing to offer and it wasn't worth the risk, although maybe if she came across Mira's…

She was surprised by the lack of guards, but they were most likely being posted elsewhere given the recent riot.

Or perhaps there was nothing here to be found by nosy quests…

She shook the thought away. She'd come this far, after all. Her hand opened the door to the next room, and found it sparse and bare. Smiling to herself, she slipped inside and closed the door.

The General's rooms were immaculate. Several of the furnishings closely resembled the ones in her room, but somehow the sparseness of everything else sucked the ornateness and colour from the space. There were no extra pillows on the bed, no frills and patterns, no vases of flowers or pretty trinkets. It looked even less lived-in than the guest chambers.

On one hand, it made the place easier to search. On the other hand, it looked like there was nothing to be found.

The main room housed nothing but a desk, dresser, side table and bed that had been placed in the corner almost like an afterthought. There were a couple of adjoining rooms; a private bathing space and a small seating area. Elena wondered if he'd set up the rooms this way because he almost never had guests; it did not look like a space for entertaining, and she supposed any political meetings would not be happening here.

She started with the dresser, taking everything out and replacing it as carefully as gears in an automaton. There was nothing squeezed into the clothes, no hidden compartments that she could discern, nothing rolled up in his fancy bottles of cologne. The bedside cabinet revealed nothing of interest either; a book, an empty notepad, a pen, a couple of brass buttons. He owned almost as little as she did.

She shook her head and went to the desk, cursing her stars that she hadn't started there. There was a file on the surface. Elena thumbed through it, but there was nothing about the Prince of Toulouse or even Sparta—just a family by the name of *Sato-Thorne.* Simple things, their address in Toulouse, where they worked or went to school, nothing that seemed important or suspicious.

She rifled through his drawers. Pens, paperclips, a ruler, a compass—a couple of keys she didn't dare remove. Neatly-stacked stationery, needles and thread, a few more buttons that had never made it where they were supposed to go.

And a tiny wooden box at the bottom of the final drawer.

Elena paused, her fingers dancing over the lid. She removed the box carefully, testing the weight. It was heavy for its size, echoing with metal.

She pried it open. Inside, wrapped in velvet like an object to be treasured, was a small clockwork mouse.

Elena turned it round in her hands. It was the only object in the room remotely out of place. Clockwork mice were usually children's toys, not a thing a general might be in possession of. Was it a toy of his own from childhood? He didn't seem the sentimental type. The only thing personal in the room was a single photograph of a woman by his desk. His wife, Elena suspected. She'd heard she'd died in a Spartan bombing—the one that started this miserable war.

One photo, and a toy mouse. And a broken one, at that. Half its gears were spilling out.

A sound along the corridor yanked her out of her thoughts, a whisper of voices. She paused, waiting for them to pass. They hovered outside the door.

Elena's gaze darted around the room, searching for cover. Not enough space under the desk, and too obvious. The wardrobe was better, or—

The door handle turned.

The bed. Under the bed.

She kicked the drawer shut, still clutching hold of the mouse, and skid underneath the wooden frame. It was empty and clean, as she expected from the general and someone who

lived in a palace with servants to clean for him. There would be no need for him to check under here.

Two men walked into the room. She recognised the polished boots and the dark green of the military uniform as belonging to the general. The other wore equally shiny dress boots with silver buckles in the shape of stags.

Elena froze, waiting for the voice that confirmed it.

"Thanks for agreeing to speak with me, General."

Prince Nero.

Elena's heart spasmed. *They won't look under the bed,* she told herself. *There's no way they'll look under the bed…*

"Of course," said General Bestiel in his clipped, measured voice. "You made it sound important."

"It is," Nero went on. "But it's also… of a delicate matter."

"Go on."

"Mira wants to put me in charge of… I'm sorry, is there something wrong?"

A hard silence followed.

"Someone's been in here," the General said.

Elena sucked in her breath. She'd closed the drawers. She knew she had. She put everything back in its proper place—

Everything but the mouse, but there was no way he knew about that. He wasn't anywhere near the desks. There was no way he could know—

“You’re sure?” started Nero. “This place looks untouched—I’m not even sure *you’ve* been in here.”

“I’m sure,” the General muttered, offering no elaboration. He moved across to the desk, rustling the paper. It sounded to Elena like the clinking of bullets into a pistol.

Nero moved around the room, obscuring what little she could view. “One of the maids, maybe?”

“They don’t touch my desk,” the General insisted.

“Honestly, I’m not sure you do either. Anything missing?”

“Not that I can discern. I don’t leave important documents here, anyway.”

“Understandable.”

There was the sound of thudding boots, of another door opening—the General had moved into the bathroom. “Check the wardrobes,” he instructed. “Anything on that side of the room—”

Nero sighed under his breath, like this was all a colossal waste of time. “If it’ll set your mind at ease…”

Elena watched as his boots padded across the plush carpet, leaving imprints in the floor.

The carpet.

Was that how he knew? It was as brushed as velvet. Even the slightest indent left a mark. It should have been easily dismissed as a servant, but if the room wasn’t slated for cleaning—and General Bestiel seemed like the sort of man

who would know every routine in the palace—then maybe his suspicions made sense.

She curled herself into a tight ball, pushing herself up against the wall under the bed, trying to time her movements with Nero and Bestiel's scrambling about.

"No one in the wardrobes," Nero reported, barely giving them a rustle. "Anything where you are?"

"No," reported the General, his voice faraway. He seemed to have moved to an adjoining room. "Keep looking."

Nero made a dismissive sound, half-heartedly moving behind a chair, before his boots came to rest in front of the bed.

He won't look, Elena told herself, as her heart tried to climb out of her throat. *He hasn't really been looking before. He won't look now. He won't he won't he won't….*

Nero crouched down.

Think of a story, an excuse, something!

If it was just Nero, perhaps she could manage something. She could cry—oh, how easily she could cry—and say someone had accosted her or she got lost trying to get back to her room and was confused and panicked when the door opened, certain she'd be told off for being out of bed. Nero would probably flirt with her and believe it and walk her back to her rooms. He might be suggestive; she'd deal with it.

But General Bestiel would never buy the suggestion that she was in here by mistake. Not the man who noticed scuff marks

in a carpet.

Nero's knees touched the floor. Elena squeezed her eyes shut. She didn't want to see what happened next—

"Anything?" called the General's voice.

Nero paused. Eternity fell between the seconds. "No," he said slowly. "There's no one here."

He stood up again.

Slowly, Elena uncurled herself, hardly daring to believe what had just transpired.

The General grumbled from the next room.

"Are you all right, General?" said Nero warmly. "I know you've been busy of late. Shall we have a spot of tea, maybe a brandy? Both? Together? Don't tell the Toulousians, I can't imagine dear—"

"A brandy," said the General.

"Good choice."

Nero crossed the room, his polished boots shining against the velvety carpet, disappearing behind the polished oak door.

Elena waited until the door closed—and then a little longer just to be sure it wasn't a trap—before wriggling out of her hiding spot and sprinting back to her room. She didn't breathe until the door was closed behind her, and her first few breaths were so rapid they almost choked her. She hovered over the sink for a moment, thinking she might be sick, before finally giving up and sliding to the ground.

What had she just done? What had just *happened?*

Was it possible that Nero hadn't seen her—that she'd blended into the background, or he hadn't really looked? That had to be it, right? He just hadn't seen her. He'd only pretended to look. There was no way he'd let her go.

She half expected him to appear any moment, complete with some story about not wanting to involve the General, but demanding an immediate explanation.

But he did not come.



Pain.

When Nero had spoken to Elena in the gardens, when he had snarled at his sister, that was what had painted the back of his words. Elena should have recognised it. And perhaps a part of her did.

If he was a viper like everyone said he was, then his scales matched hers. If he was a snake, she wasn't sure he was venomous.

Stop trusting people, Elena told herself. *Stop seeing the best in them.*

She ought to know better. She had for a long time. But something about these last couple of weeks had changed her, revived the ghost of the person she used to be, the one who was kind and trusted everyone.

Pip was largely to blame, of course.

And Snowdrop.

Elena hoped she was all right, and that she'd still be there when she returned to the outer ring. She wouldn't leave without saying goodbye, would she?

Unless she thought Elena wasn't coming back…

Elena shook her thoughts away, and climbed back into her bed. A coldness had settled over her limbs, and she wanted nothing more than to curl up into a ball and sleep, although she knew the latter would evade her.

Back in her bed, Elena examined the clockwork mouse in more detail. It was missing several screws, which meant it was easy to take apart without her usual tools, using nothing but the letter opener by the side of her bed. It was short a few gears too, but what was largely affecting its ability to be put back together was the fact that several of the cogs seemed to have melted and welded themselves to the body of the mouse.

It wasn't unfixable—nothing was—but it would have been much easier to start again from scratch. What was the General doing with it?

Her thumb brushed over two minute initials carved into the bronze shell of the body. *B.B.*

Whoever the mouse belonged to, it didn't look like it was the General's. It didn't look like it was a tool or a weapon, either. It really did look like it was a personal item of some meaning, but one he'd shoved away and forgotten about.

Not knowing what it meant bothered her more than it should have done, as did not being able to fix it with the tools she

had. She wrapped it in a handkerchief and stuffed it under the mattress, not knowing where else to hide it and worried about it being discovered on her person. She'd need to find a better space for it—or perhaps she just better leave it in an obvious space once she left. Not here, the corridor, maybe. The library. Somewhere it could be found and returned to its proper owner.

Because she couldn't go back to Bestiel's rooms. She wouldn't risk it.

Lunch came, but Elena had little appetite for it. The doctor came back to see her not long after. She said another day of rest would be required, "Unless you are able to take it easy back home?"

Elena went quiet. She knew that would be impossible. She equally knew that she really had to get back to the outer ring, and to Snowdrop. She'd discovered nothing here apart from the fact that Bestiel kept a pet mouse and Nero was perhaps not who he pretended he was.

It wasn't enough.

She sighed.

The doctor patted her hand. "Another day here, then."

A short while later, Pip came to see her. "The doctor tells me you should be well enough to go home in a day or two," he said. "I must admit, I'm happy that you're feeling better, but I'll be very sad to see you go."

Elena couldn't think of what to say to that. She didn't want to leave his side either, even though she needed to get away

from this place of secrets and back to—

Back to the Baroness, and her cold, hard bed, and to being ignored, and to—

To Pip, leaving. To the rebellion and whatever future that brought.

Still lacking the words, she launched herself forward into Pip's arms.

She didn't want it. She didn't want to do anything but stay inside this room forever with Pip beside her.

"Elena," he breathed, his arms wrapping around her.

For a long while, they sat together, not speaking, as if Pip knew she couldn't explain, as if he knew the importance of just being there and holding her.

Finally, they parted. Pip brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. "If you're feeling up for it," he told her, "I'd like to do something with you tonight. A sort of… midnight feast."

Elena smiled. "So late?"

"Well, it would be breaking a few rules. I wouldn't want to get caught."

"Such a rebel, Pip."

He smoothed down the front of his jacket. "I have my moments."

Her grin broadened. "I would love to."

"Excellent!" he said, beaming from ear-to-ear. "I shall make the arrangements."

“I shall look forward to it.”

He leant across and kissed her cheek, his lips lingering. “Until tonight, then.”



Elena’s initial plan had been to try and get some sleep in before midnight, but she’d quickly found that to be impossible. Pip’s plan had succeeded in obliterating all her fears, leaving behind only a quiet, unquenchable excitement. Passing the hours until then was exhausting.

She tried to dress herself up a bit, but there was no way she could improve upon Lucia’s earlier efforts, and she had nothing to add to the ensemble. She finished two of the books that had been left for her, and paced around her room *a lot.*

From time to time, she debated going to seek Nero out, to demand an explanation for what had transpired earlier, but she knew that would be foolish. There was a chance, however small, that he truly hadn’t seen her.

Just ignore it, she told herself. *It doesn’t matter.*

The hours ticked painfully by.

Outside in the corridor, Elena could hear the giggling of other guests returning to their rooms, the closing of doors and shuffling of feet. Servants came later, delivering last minute items and requests.

By eleven, all was silent.

Not long before midnight, Elena heard someone moving along the corridor. Her heart leapt in her throat and she bolted across the room, thinking it was Pip at last—

A woman laughed.

Elena froze. It was a strange laugh—careful and measured, low and icy, devoid of any kind of warmth.

"Shall we adjourn to your chambers?" the woman asked.

Elena pressed herself against the keyhole, trying to catch a glimpse of her. She hardly knew why, but there was something about the voice that squirmed under her skin. Through the gap, Elena could make out only a flash of midnight-blue satin and a spool of ink-black hair.

The person she was with was more visible: Prince Nero.

"Not tonight," he said, taking her hands. "You have quite worn me out already."

The woman laughed again, stepping closer, untangling her hands to slide them around his neck. His body inched back, almost imperceptibly—yet his feet remained screwed to the floor.

Elena knew that feeling, that response. It was what she did when the Baroness was speaking to her.

"I'm sure I could find a way to renew your energy…" the woman continued, in a voice that made Elena's skin crawl.

“I’m sure you could,” Nero replied, “but another night, perhaps. Good night, my Queen.”

Elena stilled. The *Queen.*

She’d seen her once before, of course, during the ball where everything changed, but she hadn’t given her a great deal of thought other than to admire her gown and shining jewels. She hadn’t heard the hardness in her voice, had given no thought to how she made others feel.

But she reminded her now of the Baroness with her claws, and Elena seized up like a rabbit, wondering if she would strike.

The Queen’s arms fell from Nero’s neck. She made a small huff of disapproval. “Fine,” she said. “Sleep well, Prince Nero.”

She disappeared from view.

Nero remained in place for another minute, features still frozen, stark and disbelieving—as if he’d just escaped a game of Russian roulette.

Finally, he slunk back to his room.

Elena removed herself from the door, unsure of exactly what she’d just witnessed and why it had left her feeling so uncomfortable, like worms were wriggling under her skin. She wanted to take a bath.

She sat down, trying to calm herself, counting the threads in the bedsheets and the flowers in the vase. If it helped, she didn’t register it.

A knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” Elena whispered.

Pip appeared in the gap, wearing a crisp white shirt, dark trousers, and a cream-coloured corset waistcoat printed with a swirling pattern. It hugged the soft shafts of his body, illuminating the shape of him, and the shirt parted at the neck revealed the start of a rather nice chest.

Elena’s insides tingled. Her mouth went strangely dry.

Pip frowned. “Are you all right?”

“You look… good.”

“Good?”

“I am not particularly great with words.”

Pip laughed, coming towards her and extending a hand. “You look lovely,” he said. “Shall we?”

Elena took his arm and slotted herself against him. They walked silently through the dark corridors, hardly daring to speak, moving towards the ballroom but not quite meeting it before Pip turned a corner and led her to a white door decorated with glass petals.

“Close your eyes,” he instructed.

Elena did. The door clicked open. He tugged her inside, whispering instructions not to peek as he slunk away from her side. She heard him fiddling with something at the side, and suddenly music was playing.

“Can I open them *yet*?”

“No, not quite yet…” he said, with a laugh in his voice. She heard the sound of a match being struck. “All right. Now.”

Elena opened her eyes and sucked in a breath. Pip had decorated a parlour in white streamers and lace, and had set up a table in the centre brimming with candlelight and silver. Inside the dishes were a myriad of spiced foods, the smell of which made Elena’s mouth water.

She looked across at Pip, unable to convey her gratitude. It had been years since anyone had done anything like this for her, years since—

Never. No one had ever done something like *this*.

“What’s wrong?” said Pip. “Did I make a mistake? Is it too much? Not enough? Is the food not to your liking?”

Elena walked up to him, grabbed his shirt, and eclipsed the gap between them by pressing her lips to his. Any gasp he had was swiftly muffled, any objection utterly lost beneath the softness of their mouths. Sensation dissolved around her. She had not expected it to feel like this, a furnace of heat, a wonderful, soft hardness. He tasted of spiced wine and gentle embers and she wanted to climb into him, to unravel beneath to, to—

She pulled away, shocked at her own thoughts, the brazenness of her actions.

Pip blinked at her with the dazed, startled expression of a bird that had flown into a window.

“Sorry,” Elena said, “I’ve been waiting a very long time to kiss someone like that.”

Pip’s throat bobbed. “I’ve been waiting a very long time to meet someone like you.”

“Like me?” she tilted her head. “And what am I like?”

“I don’t know,” he said, throat still trembling. “Good. Kind. Intelligent. Warm. Funny.”

“You’re those things too, Pip.”

“Oh no, when I’m funny, it’s entirely accidental, I assure you.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not entirely sure where we go from here.”

“We can kiss a little more, if you like?”

“That’s an excellent suggestion. Yes. I really like that, hmm…”

He was still mumbling when he stepped towards her and claimed her mouth with his. His kisses had a soft, yearning reverence, and his body—which had once seemed like such a smooth, elegant thing—now felt solid next to her own, liquidus form.

Gods and gears, she could kiss him forever.

You want to do more than kiss him…

I am not having sex for the first time in a parlour.

Whyever not?

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down onto a nearby chaise. Within seconds, she had rolled him over

and slid her thighs either side of him. Pip let out a short gasp.

"I'm sorry, am I crushing you?"

"A little bit in an extremely delightful way," he murmured. His hands slid to her cheeks. "Dome above, you're beautiful."

"I have never felt beautiful before."

Pip stared at her, and she wondered if she'd said too much, revealed too much. "I want to help you believe it," he said, and brought her mouth back down to his. "Elena," he murmured in between kisses, like no other word, no curse or prayer, could match it. "Elena, Elena, you have taken my heart."

"Mine is yours, if you want it," she said, and her hands slid beneath his shirt, above his chest. His heart beat frantically beneath her palm. *Hers, hers, hers.*

Mine, mine, mine.

Pip swallowed, shifting himself up to kiss her neck, to line a trail of kisses against her throat, down to her breast. "I am wondering if I should have worn a different waistcoat," he murmured. "This one—it's a little hard to take off."

Elena froze, both excited and terrified. She wanted him to take off his clothes. She wanted to see him—all of him. But the idea of taking off her own… of being naked before someone else… of being touched in a way she'd never been touched before…

Too much. All too much. Even for him.

Pip paused. "Are you all right?"

“Can we… just keep to kissing for now?” she asked. “Maybe *some* hands in… certain places.”

Pip raised an eyebrow. “Which places?”

She took his hand and placed it against her breast, stifling a laugh when his eyes widened.

“Gears, you’re divine,” he said, brushing the flesh beneath her dress.

Elena giggled, sliding her hands along his arms, over his neck, down his back. His skin against hers sent a thrill racing through her. She wanted to tear through his fabric, to take him apart and put him back again, having explored every inch of him.

Pip kissed her neck and cupped her breast in his hand, murmuring against her. His other hand slid to her thigh. She laced her body against his, drawing him closer, and kissed him until her thoughts turned drunk and delirious.



At last, somehow, Pip untangled himself from Elena and they sat down to dine on the midnight feast. Elena's lips were red and bright from the kissing, and he couldn't stop staring at her as she ate, watching the food press against her mouth. He was amazed he'd survived it. He'd been kissed before, but never like *that.*

It was going to be very, very hard to let her go back to her own room, when all he wanted to do was drag her back to his, throw her down on the bed, unravel her out of her gown and kiss her in all the places he had yet to before…

He downed his wine, refusing to indulge any further in his fantasies.

After they ate, he pulled her into a dance. Elena was surprisingly good, slightly clumsy on her feet though, like someone out of practice.

"Did you dance a lot, back in Navarra?"

"Yes," she said. "I loved to dance."

“Which was your favourite?”

She taught him the steps to a Navarran speciality, at least the parts she could remember, but in the end they fell into each other’s arms and just swayed together until the candles wore away to stubs.

Finally, near morning, they departed back to their own chambers.

“Goodnight, Elena,” he said, kissing her hand at the door.

“Goodnight, Pip.”

They swept once more into a kiss far from chaste, and it took all of his restraint not to follow her inside her room.

In the morning—just a few hours later—he woke to Susan staring over him. He groaned at the light and the lack of sleep, stuffing his head back under the covers.

“Late night?” said Susan, her voice heavy with grinning.

Pip muttered something incomprehensible.

“Did Elena like the feast?”

He removed his head from the covers. “Yes.”

“Did you?”

“Very much so.” He sighed, rolling over in bed. “I like her too much, don’t I?”

“I rather suspect so.” Susan paused. “Phillippe—”

“Oh no, full name, I must be in trouble.”

Susan did not laugh. “I must admit, I was hesitant when this whole thing came to light, but having met her—having seen the way she makes you light up—I would be remiss on a personal level if I didn’t at least point out that, well… have you considered making her your mistress?”

Pip swallowed, sitting upright. He caught Susan’s gaze, just to be sure she wasn’t joking. Her face was as stony as it had ever been. “I wouldn’t do her the dishonour.”

“Maybe you should let her decide what counts as a dishonour,” she said. “She likes you. A great deal. She has nothing to keep her here. And I’m sure neither one of us likes the idea of leaving her in her present circumstances.”

She wasn’t wrong here. Worse than the thought of leaving Elena was the thought of leaving her with that awful woman in that rickety, run-down apartment. But would she want to go with him to Toulouse, to live with him in what her holy book regarded as sin?

Could he take her saying no?

Could he take her saying *yes,* and taking her back to Toulouse, and her hating life at court, and loving him in the shadows, and him having to one day marry someone else?

Would she do that? Would *he?*

If it was happiness, it wasn’t the complete kind—fractured and dysfunctional, a broken automaton she would never be able to fix.

You could let her decide.

But, even as he pondered it, he knew that wasn't what she really wanted, that she wouldn't destroy her plans of years for a boy she'd only known a couple of weeks.

Her feverish words came back to haunt him.

Take me home.

I want to go home. I need to go home.

He couldn't bring her to Toulouse. He couldn't leave her behind, either.

"Susan," Pip said, "can you find out when the next train to Navarra leaves?"



Finally, Elena's convalescence at the palace came to an end. Pip escorted her to the lifts himself, not smiling, his face set and stern. Elena wondered if she'd done something wrong, if she should have invited him back to her chamber that night like she so desperately wanted to.

No, she told herself, *Pip isn't like that. And if he was, he would not be worth your affection.*

And he was, he was worth that and so, so much more.

"I wish you were staying longer," he admitted, erasing her doubts as swiftly as they came. "I've liked having you around. Rather immeasurably, actually."

Elena nodded. “I like being around you, too.”

He took her knuckles, and kissed her hand. “Tomorrow, then? Our usual time.”

Elena looked around her for any prying eyes, and, finding none, leant across to kiss him. “Tomorrow.”



Unwilling to go back to the Baroness’ apartment, and eager to see Snowdrop and report what little she knew, Elena headed straight for the outer ring and back to her garage. As suspected, the Baroness had left a heap of projects for her to complete, but refreshed as she was and eager for a distraction, Elena set to them right away. Most of them were simple, easy fixes—replacing a spring here, a gear there—nothing hard.

She had no way of contacting Snowdrop without banging again on all of the doors. She couldn’t quite remember which one it was, and she was in no mood to cause a spectacle again. She’d give her a few hours before doing anything drastic.

The clockwork mouse warmed in her pocket. For some reason, Elena hadn’t been able to part with it. She wished she could say it was because she believed it held some secret piece of information, but she didn’t think that was true. She simply felt this strange need to have it beside her, to make it work again.

There is a reason for this, she told herself. *I believe. I believe.*

It took a long time to untangle the snared gears, and even longer to prise the melted cogs from the shell. Then began the more complicated task of reconfiguring and replacing everything. Elena knew by now how most mechanisms slotted together, her fingers sliding in gear after gear before her mind even fully comprehended what she was doing. There were still unknown variables, like the precise size of the cogs and springs she'd need, and the process of elimination was long and arduous.

Finally, though, the mechanism was finished. She pressed everything back into the body, closed it shut with a bit of scrap metal, and wound it up.

It buzzed back to life, darting straight for the side of the workbench and almost skittering off the side. Elena laughed, picking it up only for the little creature to squirm out of her grip and whizz over her arms, as skittish as a real life mouse.

"You're a lively little fellow!" she said, giving it space to move around. "I think I shall call you BeeBee."

BeeBee—after the initials stamped on it. She might never be able to locate the original owner, but at least a part of them could survive in the name she gave their mouse.

"You certainly seem to have your hands full."

Elena looked up sharply. Snowdrop was standing in the doorway.

“Snow!” Elena stood up, and before she was even fully aware of her actions, she’d bolted across the room and thrown herself around her. “You’re still here.”

“Of *course* I’m still here. Where have you been? Someone posted a note—”

“I was taken ill at the palace,” Elena said. “I just got back today.”

“You’re all right?”

“Never better.”

Snowdrop paused, a smile twitching in her cheeks. “You seem happy.”

Elena grinned, blushing deeply, and told her all that had happened. The sudden illness, Pip looking after her… even a bit about the midnight feast.

“I’m sorry I didn’t learn anything,” she said when her story was done. “I did try to sneak into General Bestiel’s chambers, but, well… I didn’t find anything useful, and I almost got caught.”

“Almost?”

“Prince Nero saw me, I think, but he didn’t tell General Bestiel. I actually think he helped me sneak away.”

Snowdrop snorted. “Unlikely. He probably just didn’t see you.”

It made the most sense, but Elena was not convinced. “And you?” she asked. “What have you been doing whilst I’ve been

away?”

Snowdrop smiled. “We’ve got a plan to rescue the prince,” she said. “And we’re going to need your help. But I don’t think you’re going to like it.”



"You want me to do *what?*" Elena screeched.

"I think you heard me."

"Well, I must have heard incorrectly, because that plan is ludicrous. I think I've proven, time and time again, that I am no spy."

"You've surprised me time and time again," Snowdrop assured her. "Gears, you used your convalescence at the palace to break into the General's quarters."

"It wasn't really breaking in—"

Snowdrop fixed her with a withering stare.

"I had a few moments of bravery! This… this is something else."

"No one will catch on."

"How do you know that?"

"Because people are stupid," Snowdrop announced. "And also, slightly racist."

Elena glared. “Princess Sofia looks nothing like me.”

“No one has seen her in years. It’s a masked ball. It’s *perfect.*”

Elena was not convinced.

“I’ll be right beside you the whole time.”

“Dressed as a servant.”

“Yes.”

“Ready to cause some distraction at the right moment and race off with the Prince once we’ve identified him.”

“Yes.”

“This is a terrible plan.”

“It’s a *brilliant* one.”

Elena sighed, taking in a deep, shuddering breath. This couldn’t be right. There had to be something else, another way.

But she couldn’t get the Prince out by herself. The Rebellion needed a way to get in.

The ball—and Princess’ Sofia’s arrival—was the perfect cover.

“I’ll need a dress,” Elena announced. “Unless Princess Sofia has had a *very* big growth spurt in the last few years, I’m not fitting into anything she’s brought with her.”

Snowdrop’s blue eyes gleamed. “Oh, we’ve already thought of that. Come on, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”



Snowdrop led her out of her own garage and down a couple of aisles, still limping ever-so-slightly. She knocked on another corrugated door a few streets away.

It rolled up almost instantly, revealing the bright, shining face of Clover. He beamed at Elena like they were old friends. “You’re going to do it?”

“For some foolish reason, yes.”

“*Excellent.* Dan, Buttercup, she said she’s going to do it!”

Buttercup?

Elena was ushered in, the door hastily closed behind her. One half of the garage—identical in size and shape to hers—was backed with narrow bunks. A small kitchen was crammed into the back, where a door led to a small toilet area. The rest of the space was taken up with tables and trunks. Maps lined the walls alongside weapons and rope, grappling hooks, binoculars.

The home of the rebellion. A shoddy garage in the outer ring.

Dandelion came forward, also smiling, and behind him, rising from one of the bunks which sagged under his weight, was the largest person Elena had ever seen.

He looked like a grizzly bear from an ancient story book, as wide and tall as a cottage, his huge hairy arms roped with muscle. Black, wiry hair occupied most of his face, covering his eyes, his head, his chin. His thick brow covered his eyes.

He could have snapped any one of them like a toothpick.

“This is Buttercup,” said Clover, “another member of our merry band, and Dandelion’s husband.”

Buttercup bowed his head. “Pleasure to meet you, Miss Elena,” he said, in a rough, gravelly voice.

“Buttercup is many things,” Snowdrop explained, “including a fabulous tailor.”

“A… tailor?”

“We thought we might have to create a dress for you—for time constraints if nothing else. Buttercup is more than up for the task.”

“I’ll need your measurements,” Buttercup continued. “Before we go and steal some fabric fit for a princess. You have lovely colouring. I’ll be sure to find something flattering.”

Elena blinked at them all, her legs feeling wobbly. “I’m sorry,” she said, “this is all rather a lot. Might I trouble you for some tea?”

Snowdrop snorted. “A few days with a Toulousian and she’s already talking like one of them. Do we look like we have tea, girl?”

“We’ve got whiskey?” said Clover, holding out a tankard.

“That’ll do.”

Elena seized the tankard from Clover’s hand and practically inhaled it. The whiskey burned her throat. “*Engranages y dioses,* that’s strong!” she coughed, choking it up.

Clover took back the tankard. Elena slumped down on a nearby bunk. “Are we sure this will work?”

“We aren’t sure of anything,” said Dandelion. “But this is the best plan we have.”

“You think you can intercept Sofia’s train?”

“Won’t be the first train job we’ve pulled.”

“What about causing a distraction at the ball?”

“We’re working on that. The ball offers a unique opportunity for us to get into the palace, but they will still be checking the guests for weapons. We’ll think of something.”

“No explosions, please,” Elena begged.

Snowdrop’s eyes flickered. “We’ll try to avoid them.”

Elena wracked her brain. A smoke grenade would be ideal, but it would need to be disguised as something. Multiple ones, preferably, which they could all time to go off together.

“I’ll try and think of something.”

Snowdrop grinned. “I can’t wait to see it.”



Head reeling from the impossible plan and the mission she'd signed up for, Elena made her way back to the Baroness' apartment in the middle ring. The one good thing about Snowdrop's mad idea was that she felt less afraid to return. What could the Baroness do to her now? Even the climb to the top felt like nothing.

She rapped lightly on the door. The Baroness had never seen fit to give her a key. She would usually leave the door unlocked for her, but not always. Not if she displeased her.

The door flung open. Mariah stood in the entrance. "Elena!" she said, throwing her arms around her. "You're OK!"

Elena hugged her back, but couldn't find any words to utter.

The Baroness glared at her from inside the apartment. "And where have you been? We were told to expect you back this morning."

Elena chose her next words carefully. "I'm sorry, Stepmother," she said, "I wanted to get a headstart on any work that had been waiting for me. I went down to the garage instead."

The Baroness pursed her lips. Elena imagined that this answer pleased her, but she didn't want to admit it. "Well, I'm glad you've taken some steps to make up for this unfortunate

absence of yours," she said. "And at least the Crown was kind enough to compensate us for your absence… although why they sent a Toulousian here, I've no idea."

"Toulousian? You mean… Pip?"

"She said her name was Susan-something, why?"

"Nothing."

Elena had no idea why Susan came, nor why compensation was offered in the first place. Pip had said something about it, but she'd half-assumed he'd made it up to calm her. Susan must have come as a favour to Pip. It didn't explain the monetary compensation, though… Why would Mira ever offer such a thing? Mira, who didn't know who she was, who killed her own subjects for telling stories and barely took 'no' for an answer?

The Baroness clicked her fingers against the sideboard. "It's late," she said. "We've been having to cook our own dinner, not that you care. There might be some leftovers you can eat. Don't hover in the door. You're letting in a draft."

Elena did not need to be told twice. She closed the door behind her and headed into the kitchen, reheating leftovers as quietly as possible to avoid the Baroness' temper. It would not be the first time she'd changed her mind about feeding her after offering. The reheated stew tasted like paste next to the delicacies of the palace, but that hardly mattered. She ate it quickly and headed to her tiny room and the cold, musty sheets.

She dressed in her frayed nightgown, trying not to think of the silk one she'd borrowed in the place, and lay down on the bed. She wasn't exhausted enough to sleep on the lumpy mattress between the cold, rough layers. Her thoughts were louder than ever.

Thoughts of home and Navarra seemed further away than ever, and so did Pip, away in the palace, on the brink of leaving her and Petragrad forever. The idea of never seeing him again scraped at her heart. The same heart she'd offered to him.

One way or another, it would all be over the night of the ball.

Would she even get to say goodbye?

There was a soft knock at the door, and in came Mariah, black hair in rags, eyes bright. She skipped across the room and sat down next to her.

"Mama's asleep," she told her. "I'm so glad you're back."

"Me too," she said, almost meaning it for Mariah's sake.

"Guess what happened while you were away?"

"Hmm… you grew two inches?"

"No."

"Ivanka *smiled?*"

"Definitely not."

"The Baroness said something nice?"

Mariah pouted.

“Well, I’m afraid I’m all out of ideas.”

Mariah clapped her hands together. “We’ve all been invited to the *ball!* Apparently Maman’s title still counts for something, because we received these beautiful invitations…”

Elena paused, only half-listening to her. It seemed strange that Mira would extend them an invitation after all this time.

She’s desperate, she realised. News of the revolt was certain to have spread to the palace by now. Mira needed the support of her citizens, a show that everything was fine, and was inviting anyone that could pass as noble.

“Maman’s already brought me some *beautiful* shoes—want to see?”

“Sure.”

Mariah raced out of the room.

Oh gears, what if the invitation included *her?* She couldn’t go, not with her plan to help the rebellion, but how would she ever get out of it if the Baroness insisted? She was still the daughter of a baron after all. If she was on the invite, if the Baroness wanted to make a show—

She won’t let you come, a voice reminded her. *You are not her family.*

Never had Elena been more glad of it.

Mariah hurried back in, holding out a pair of court shoes composed of silver gears and white satin, ribboned and dotted with pearls.

“The pearls aren’t real,” Mariah explained, catching her gaze, “but it doesn’t matter; no one really notices shoes anyway.”

She sat down on the creaky bed and slipped them onto her feet, lifting them up for close inspection.

“Aren’t they too high for you?” Elena remarked.

Mariah giggled. “Ivanka said the same thing, but then joked that I can always use them to fend off unwanted suitors. Shoes can be weapons, you know.” She paused for a moment. “My father said something similar, once.”

Elena’s voice vanished. She knew little about Mariah’s father—the Baroness’ first husband. A soldier, she thought. It made sense he’d see something as harmless as a shoe as a weapon.

She froze, thinking.

But who else would?

What was it Mariah had said—that nobody really noticed shoes? And despite Ivanka’s joke, Elena had never heard of anyone actually using a shoe as a *real* weapon… not in this century, anyway.

“Elena?” Mariah nudged her shoulder. “What do you think?”

“I think they’re very pretty,” she replied, now staring at the shoes for an entirely different reason.

And I think I’ve found the answer to our problem.



"Let me get this straight," said Snowdrop the next morning, her brow furrowed, "You want to put a grenade… inside of a shoe?"

"A smoke grenade," Elena clarified.

"To cause a distraction."

"That is correct."

"And you think you can design this?"

"Oh, I know I can," said Elena confidently. She'd never made a smoke grenade, but she'd also never met something she *couldn't* make, with time and the right tools. She'd taken one apart before. She knew the basics. She'd been drawing up the plans in her head last night, dreaming of cogs doing exactly what she wanted them to do. "I just need a few days and a few ingredients. If… you can help me?"

Snowdrop slid off her seat, marched towards Elena, and grabbed her by the arms. "I'd kiss you, but I don't think you'd be into that."

Clover, drinking something in the corner of the rebel's garage, snorted into his flask. "I also approve of the grenade-shoe," he said. "Not that anyone asked my opinion."

"Just let me know the colours," said Buttercup, still lying on his bunk with Dandelion dozing on his chest, "so that the dress matches."

Elena laughed. "I think it would be easier if you gave me scraps of dress fabric to work with. The shoes will be mostly bronze, for the gears."

"We can work on something together!"

Elena admired his enthusiasm. "I need to get to work," she announced. "I just thought I should let you know. Here's a list of the equipment I'll need."

She handed Snowdrop a short list. Most of the things she already had—apart from the smoking function itself. That she could not get hold of by herself.

Snowdrop pocketed the letter. "We'll have everything by tonight."



The downside of having the shoes to work on meant that Elena had to go straight home after finishing at the palace, leaving no time for her usual rendez-vous with Pip. She left him a note at her desk explaining that she had an urgent commitment, but

her heart still ached as she made a swift exit, as if she was leaving half of it behind. She supposed she should get used to the feeling.

Not yet, she begged time. *Not yet, not yet, not yet.*

She flew down to the outer ring with a strange kind of eagerness, hoping to get the shoes done as soon as possible and return to her usual evening's activities. She already knew roughly how long they should take. She could finish them in three days.

Snowdrop was waiting for her at the door, together with a large bag. "Supplies," she explained. "And… something else. You'll see."

Elena opened up the door and hastened inside, shutting it behind them. Snowdrop began to take out the equipment inside her bag, laying out everything over the workbench before removing a frothy monstrosity.

Elena froze. "Please tell me that is not my dress."

Snowdrop laughed. "Just the undergarments. Buttercup wants to make sure they fit. Also, you need to practise dancing with the hoop skirt."

Elena groaned, but didn't argue. She seized the half-dress and marched into the corner to pull it on. Snowdrop cleared some space to dance, trying not to laugh as Elena emerged, feeling like a less attractive version of a frosted cupcake.

"I look ridiculous."

“You look *adorable.*” Snowdrop stepped towards her, slipping an arm around her waist, fulfilling the role usually occupied by a man although she was shorter than her by a head. “I’m sorry we couldn’t get any music.”

“I have a metronome I was fixing for someone,” Elena said, slipping away to fetch it. “It’s better than nothing.”

“Good call. We’ll try the *Brandy Mare* first, shall we? That’s always a popular one.”

Elena eyed the equipment on her workbench. She wanted to get started on the shoes.

“The shoes won’t matter if you can’t last at the ball long enough to locate the prince,” Snowdrop told her. “We won’t spend too long. Promise.”

Elena nodded. “All right.”

Although her only experience dancing in the last four years had been the single night with Pip—where they had been largely distracted—Elena surprised herself by how easy it was to slip back into rhythm. She remembered most of the dances near-perfectly. If she was a little rusty, it didn’t take long to oil her.

Dancing was possibly the one part of the plan she was confident about. Well, that and her ability to create the smoke-grenade slippers. Everything else… she didn’t even want to think about it.

“You’re distracted,” Snowdrop remarked, as she twirled her awkwardly under her arm.

“I have a lot on my mind.”

“Are any of those things *Pip?*”

Elena stumbled, missing the step and almost tumbling into a nearby pile of broken tools.

“Try not to be distracted in your actions,” Snowdrop instructed, sweeping her into the next step. She was good, Elena realised. More than good, even. Confident, elegant. Skills she hadn’t likely picked up in the rebellion.

“Snowdrop?” Elena asked, not breaking the dance, “Who were you? Before you were… you?”

She wanted to ask her her real name, but that felt like too much of an imposition, too much of a thing to know.

Snowdrop paused, wearing the same sad smile Elena thought that she might wear herself whenever she thought of home. “Another time, perhaps,” she said, and drew away from her at last. “I’ll let you get started on the shoes now, and get the dress back to Buttercup. Miracles take a bit of time, you know.”



The following morning, Elena arrived at her desk at the palace to find a note in an elegant hand, together with a tiny wrapped parcel. The supervisor saw her pick it up, and quickly averted her eyes, smiling like she knew something Elena didn’t.

Trying to avoid the feeling she had become the subject of gossip, Elena opened the note.

Lunch, one o'clock, the maze?

Yours, most ardently,

Pip.

It was accompanied by a perfectly drawn map leading to the centre of the maze. Elena clutched it to her chest. The note even smelled like him—clean, slightly lemony, with undercurrents of peppermint.

Inside the small parcel was a miniscule cake composed of several layers of delicate sponge, drizzled with pink icing and topped with dried fruit. All attempts to savour it failed.

She hoped he brought more at lunch.

She propped his note up as she worked, trying not to get distracted with thoughts of him or thoughts of the slippers. She wished she'd been able to work longer on them last night, but after a full day's work, a walk through the outer ring, and dance practice, she'd barely had the energy.

She wasn't worried about not finishing them in time for the ball. She was worried about losing her evenings with Pip.

Pip. How strange that she knew everything and nothing about him—not even his last name.

Lunch came, and Elena slipped away into the gardens, unfolding Pip's map to guide herself through the winding

hedgerows. She reached the centre in no time at all. A blanket and pillows had been laid out beside the fountain, together with plates of food—delicate finger sandwiches, strawberries and cream, and more of the cake she'd been served in the morning, now in four different colours.

A hand closed around her wrist. Elena turned just as Pip's mouth came crashing down towards her, his hands closing around her hair and back, pulling her close to him. They stumbled backwards, falling to the grass, and kissed until they both felt breathless and Elena's insides tingled hotly. She didn't want to let him go. Her body ached to claim him. Why had her courage failed her the night of the midnight feast? She could sneak into a general's private quarters but lost her wits about the possibility of intimacy with Pip? What a fool she was.

Pip finally drew back. "Ah, hello," he said, face broadening into a smile. "Lovely to see you."

Elena stroked his cheek. "How lovely to be seen." She drew his mouth back to hers.

"I missed you yesterday," he murmured between kisses.

"I'm sorry," she whispered back. "This project—it shouldn't take more than another couple of days."

"A couple of days…" His gaze drifted for a moment, lost on some thought. Elena suspected it was the same one she kept having.

“I know we don’t have much longer,” she told him. “If this project wasn’t essential, I wouldn’t be doing it. Trust me. There is nowhere I would rather be than with you.”

Pip kissed her with his smiling mouth. “You are the greatest peace I’ve ever known,” he said. “I’m rather worried that…”

“Yes?”

“I’m worried that this is it,” he said, winding his fingers into hers. “I’m worried that this is the greatest I’m ever going to feel, and I can’t…”

“You can’t what?”

“Prolong it,” he said stiffly. “Take you with me.”

Elena’s heart leapt, murmuring beneath his words. She wanted to follow him. She wanted to go with him until the earth ended, forsaking all other homes but his. She felt, if it were possible, that she’d do anything to achieve it—anything to preserve that dream.

“Elena?” Pip prompted.

She grabbed his face and kissed him again. “I would go with you, if I could,” she told him, breaking the kiss just long enough to utter the words. “I’d follow you wherever. If there wasn’t… if I could…”

The words dissolved on her tongue, and his vanished too. They tied themselves together with touches and kisses, precious and feverish, sweet and painful. Gears and Gods, how she wanted him, how deep the ache for him went.

He hasn't gone yet.

Her hands slid to the front of his jacket, prying open brass buttons, sliding to the silk shirt beneath. Her fingers splayed against the smooth flatness of his stomach. He wasn't muscular, but his skin danced beneath her own like a firework. He moaned into her mouth.

She eased back, still kissing him, helping him with the stays on her bodice and half ripping it off, letting him sink his palms into her flesh, gasping as his hands moved up to her buttons and explored her breasts with trembling, expert attention.

"Pip," she called his name as if she were drowning.

"*Elena*."

A bell went off in the distance.

Pip stiffened.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's summoning all the nobles for croquet," he said, easing back to rebutton his clothes. "I'm sorry—I thought we'd have more time."

"Must you go?"

"I'll be missed if I linger too long," he said. "If I thought I could get away with it—gears, if there was any chance—" He paused to stare at Elena, her bodice hanging off, her bare chest still on full display. "I really do not want to leave you right now, believe me."

Elena inched into a sitting position, helping him to straighten up his shirt. “You know, I rather do.” She kissed him briefly, careful not to linger too much on his lips. How easy it would be to fall into him again, to sink herself into that meadow.

Pip sighed against her. “Please, enjoy the food in my absence,” he insisted. “I’ll come back for the rest of it later.”

Elena’s stomach rumbled. “I would like to say something deeply romantic about not wanting to eat without you, but I am going to demolish that spread and I hope you find something else to eat.”

A more experienced girl might be able to make a joke about other things she’d rather eat, but she was not more experienced, and she was equally sure that no part of a human could actually taste as excellent as the cake she’d had earlier.

Pip laughed, kissing her once more, before vanishing into the rest of the maze.

Elena groaned, lying back briefly against the grass to collect herself, heart still thrashing in her chest. Her body hummed in memory of him. How close she’d gotten that time to willingly losing all reason—and out in the open, too.

I want him, her thoughts thumped. *I need him.*

She redressed herself and crawled towards the picnic, determined to experience some semblance of satisfaction. It *was* delicious. It would have been more delicious if he could have stayed. Would anyone really have missed a servant?

Then again, it wasn't hard to imagine people missing Pip…

Sighing, she packed up the leftovers and took them back to the workshop with her, determined to finish work as soon as possible. The sooner she could finish the slippers, the better.



That evening, Snowdrop came by to summon Elena back to the rebel's garage.

"No dancing practice tonight," she said. "I promise. Buttercup's been hard at work on the dress. He needs you for alterations."

Elena nodded, closing up shop and following her into the dark, smoky streets. They walked briskly, arriving at the garage in record time. Elena was dragged into the back and helped out of her clothes by Dandelion and Buttercup, Snowdrop and Clover politely turning their backs as she was wrestled into the undergarments and wrapped in a gown that looked composed of scraps of blue-green fabric. No one had helped her dress for years, least of all a burly mountain-bear and his quick-fingered, silver-haired husband.

Buttercup stood back to admire his creation. He let out a quiet gasp. "Twirl, my dear. Let me see it."

Elena did so, feeling like a doll in a music box, pinned in place. The gown felt lovely—it had that soft heaviness she

remembered well, and she could see now that it was on her that the ‘scraps’ were cut in the shape of petals, billowing over the caged skirt. The bodice hugged her curves, pushing her breasts up, and two short sleeves of midnight gossamer brushed across her shoulders.

She looked down at her hands, at the engine grease and old burns and calluses.

“We’ll get you gloves,” said Buttercup, registering her discomfort. “No one will be looking at your hands.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, rubbing her arms. “I still feel a little exposed. Aren’t my shoulders too broad? I don’t… I don’t look much like a princess.”

“What are you talking about?” said Snowdrop, as if Elena’s self-deprecation was some personal affront to her. “You are *stunning*. Your hair, your lips, your muscular arms and your glorious thighs…”

Elena stared at her.

“Sorry, I am very bisexual. But you’re clearly in love with this Pip chap, so please take any and all attempts to flirt with you to be nothing more than friendly banter.”

Elena’s heart thumped. *In love. In love. She thinks I’m in love with Pip.*

Aren’t you?

Buttercup came forward again with a plain, unfinished mask. He fit it over Elena’s face, marking out lines with a pencil before handing it to Dandelion. A set of pins appeared

from nowhere, and he started to work his way down Elena's gown, pinching it at the waist, turning it at the hem. He muttered things under his breath about snipping it here and there, adding embellishments to certain areas.

"I need some golden thread," he declared, "or glitter. Sequins, maybe."

Snowdrop scoffed. "You'll be lucky."

"Are we robbing a rich merchant again?" Clover asked, clapping his hands together. "I *love* robbing rich merchants! The richer, the better. Sign me up."

"Just make sure he doesn't take it out on his workers," Elena mumbled.

The rest of the group fell quiet. Doubtless, they didn't often pause to think about everyone their actions affected, or the fact that the rich always tended to find a way to blame the poor for their troubles. *"Why didn't you lock up last night/fight back/put the items in a more secure location?*" She'd had a couple of break-ins herself over the years. Completely unavoidable. The Baroness had always found a way to blame her, and made her work extra hard to cover the deficit, often with rusty replacement tools not suitable for purpose.

Suddenly, no one seemed to be admiring her or the dress anymore.

Clover looked down at his feet. "We'll do our best."



For the next few days, everything in Elena's life revolved around the rebellion and finishing the slippers. She experienced a minor setback when she accidentally set off the grenade in her prototype, undoing half a day's hard work. Try as she might to remind herself that this accident was fortunate—that it had revealed a problem that would have been catastrophic in the final pair—her frustration was exacerbated by the knowledge that she was eating painfully into her time with Pip.

Tick, tick, tick.

Each slip, every failure, every time a cog needed to be adjusted, she was reminded how quickly their time together was coming to an end.

She had no time in the evenings. A short meeting at lunch was usually all they could manage, over far too quickly and leaving her with an empty, breathless feeling. She had not yet had enough of him.

She never would.

You're clearly in love with this Pip chap.

She hadn't told him. She wasn't sure she could. They'd expressed similar sentiments before, the night of the midnight feast, but the precise words had escaped them. Would that make the parting worse, or easier?

What if he didn't say it back?

He liked her. She knew that much. But ignorant though she was of romance, she knew that there were layers to love, that some people threw the word around, using it to describe fleeting crushes, pure attraction, lust—

Pip had been nothing but a perfect gentleman (except on the occasions where she asked him not to be, she thought with a smile) but he was also unfathomably kind. It was hard to tell what was just in his nature, and what was purely reserved for her.

You could ask him, said a voice inside her. And Elena knew that she could, but if she couldn't handle the wrong response, why would she?

Finally, mercifully, the slippers were finished, with only two days to spare until the ball.

Snowdrop looked at them as Elena handed them to Buttercup to dress them up a bit, giving him careful instructions of how to handle them. She'd designed the mechanism to work by clapping the heels together. It was risky, as any bump of too much pressure could risk setting

them off, but she thought it was better to do that than rely on setting them off with her hands.

Just in case she was caught.

Don't think about that.

"Are you sure they're ready?" Snowdrop asked.

"Do you doubt me?"

Snowdrop sighed. "Not you," she said. "Come on, let's go over the plan again."

Elena nodded. "I won't have to hurt anyone, right?"

"No. You won't even be armed—not unless you want to be."

"I do not."

"Stand behind Buttercup at all times. Clover will take the rear." She laid out a map of the subway tunnels, moving a small piece into place that was to represent Princess Sofia's train. The plan was to force it to divert into an abandoned tunnel before it reached the station, take it over, replace the princess and her guards, and resume the route.

"We'll have ten minutes to make the exchange," Snowdrop reiterated. "Any longer, alarm bells will be ringing."

"All right."

"Oh, and you'll need a code name."

"Do I?" Elena arched an eyebrow. "I don't care if anyone knows who I am. It's not like I'm leaving anyone behind."

Snowdrop went quiet for a moment. “There’s always someone we leave behind,” she said darkly, and then, much lighter, “We thought Cinder would suit.”

Elena frowned. “I thought the names were plant themed?”

“Usually, but Cinder just fits, Miss Mechanic. Do you not like it?”

“I like my name.”

“Hmm, Cinder-Elena then? No, that doesn’t sound right. Cinderel? That’s kind of pretty.”

Elena shrugged. “Whatever you like. I don’t really mind.”

Elena didn’t want to talk about the plan, or even think about it. She was sure, at this stage, that no amount of thinking or planning was actually going to make the difference as to whether or not they pulled it off. It all depended on the day, on the guards on duty, on the actions of others.

She felt like she wanted to be sick.

“Go,” said Snowdrop, as if sensing her distress. “Enjoy what little time you have left in the city, little rebel.”



That night, Elena tossed and turned in bed. Snowdrop had given her a small bag to pack any personal items into, but staring up at the cracked ceiling, Elena could think of so little

to bring with her. Her stepmother had sold every item of her father's. The ashes on the mantelpiece weren't his. There were a few tools in her workshop she was moderately attached to, but anything else…

The bag under her bed contained nothing in it but a spare change of clothes, the money she'd been saving, and the clockwork mouse she'd liberated from the palace. For some reason, she did not want to leave him behind.

Her fingers drifted down towards the rough canvas of the bag, rustling through the insides until she felt the cool metal of the mouse. She lifted him onto the mattress with her. She didn't dare wind him up here, in case he made too much noise and the Baroness came marching into the room and dashed the poor thing to pieces. Instead, Elena ran her hands over his tiny body, admiring every gear that made him tick, marvelling at the workmanship of the first maker as well as her own.

Just you and me soon, little buddy.

The thought did not fill her with much comfort. She didn't want to be alone, and even though she knew she'd be with Snowdrop and the others, that arrangement was only supposed to be temporary. She wouldn't be taking them with her to Navarra.

She forced herself to think of green fields and old friends, but no memory she summoned could plug up the ache inside her.



Pip had been longing to speak to Elena—truly speak to her—for days now. He could tell she was distracted with something, more so than this project she was working on. He had no reason to suspect she was hiding something from him, as she seemed to enjoy their stolen time as much as he did, but there was *something* going on with her, something she didn't want to share or couldn't.

Not that he could talk. She didn't even know who he really was. He'd asked her if she was in trouble. She said she wasn't. He asked her if she was all right. She said she was. Any more than that seemed rude to pry.

Lucia, in an attempt he felt more was to give Susan some relief from his jitteriness rather than anything else, had taken over the task of readying him for the ball. She leant him her personal tailor, designing him a waistcoat of white and silver, stitched with patterns of moons and flowers, and a mask of lace to match.

"This mask hardly hides my features," Pip remarked.

Lucia turned from the mirror where she was examining her own—a grand gold creation that reached all the way into her hair, with spikes emerging from her curls to emulate the rays of the sun. "You think the aim of a masked ball is to remain anonymous?"

“Surely that’s the point?”

“The point is to look *fabulous,*” Lucia said. “And to give the nobles something to talk about other than the war in Sparta and the revolts in the outer ring. If Mira can organise a party, she can organise a war.”

“That’s ludicrous.”

“That’s *politics*.”

“I don’t understand how you enjoy all of this.”

Lucia shrugged, turning in the room, light bouncing off her gold petticoats like a moving painting. “Think of it as a game you have to win, and it becomes a lot more fun.”

Pip swallowed. “People aren’t pawns.”

Lucia sighed. The tailor made a few more adjustments, and wrestled Pip out of his waistcoat. Pip moved behind a screen to change as the tailor gathered up his equipment and made his escape, Lucia still hovering nearby.

“Speaking of people,” she began.

“A tentative link. Continue.”

“I couldn’t help but notice that our very charming houseguest had absolutely no idea who you were. Seemed quite confused about the whole arrangement.”

Pip froze. “Did you tell her?” Surely Elena would have said something if Lucia had told her. Or maybe… maybe that’s why she’d seemed different these last few days. Because she

knew who he was. Why wouldn't she say anything? Did she think he'd been toying with her—

"I did not," Lucia said. "It did not seem my secret to tell."

"Ah. Right. Good." He didn't realise until Lucia confirmed that Elena still didn't know that a part of him *wanted* her to. He wanted the secret out.

"But… it also doesn't quite seem your secret to keep, either," Lucia went on. Her silhouette crept closer to the screen, even as her voice grew softer. "We keep a lot of secrets in our line of work, but this… this shouldn't be one of them. She deserves to know."

"I know she does," Pip replied, just as softly, "and I am going to tell her, I promise."

Lucia's silhouette nodded. "Don't leave it too late."

The door opened a moment later, just as Pip finished dressing. Susan walked back in, looking slightly more flushed than usual.

"I'll see you later," said Lucia, nodding to the both of them.

Susan came forward as the door closed behind the princess.

"Did you get it?" Pip asked.

Susan nodded, placing a golden envelope on the dresser next to the discreet black box. "At no small expense."

He shrugged. "The best money I have ever spent."

Susan avoided his gaze, still staring at the envelope. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

No. Yes. Maybe. Of course.

“It’s the right thing to do,” he said.

“And what about for you?”

“I don’t matter.”

Susan shook her head. “Yes, you do. And I think she would appreciate the choice.”

Pip thought of all he had to do before the ball, all he had to say, and wondered if in all of that he’d find the courage to ask her to come with him or the courage to go home without her. “I know,” he admitted, “but—”

“Feelings, yes. Complicated things. I remember them well.” She patted his hand. “Good luck, my prince. You shall need it.”



The day before the ball, Elena and her fellow mechanics were summoned from the workshops into the ballrooms, where most of their work was on full display. The automaton servants stood in a line, dressed up in silken dresses with lace frills and painted porcelain faces. They looked almost human, although not quite. Never *quite.*

They were wound up and set about the tasks, carrying trays laden with water and glasses to test their balance and speed.

Other human servants came to assist, mimicking the role of the guests to ensure the automatons could navigate around them successfully. Any adjustments were completed then and there.

It was an exhausting, gruelling day, with lots of running back to the workshop for tools and repairs.

It was impossible to get away for lunch. It was served in the ballroom, the exits tightly patrolled, security increased with the arrangements for the ball underway and the not unfounded worry that someone might attempt something. Elena kept her eyes peeled. The biggest variable in their plan was not knowing when the proposed assassination might take place. Snowdrop was almost certain that they would wait for some special moment or event. “Mira will have something planned for midnight,” she explained. “She always does. And Sparta wants to create chaos—they will want all eyes on their actions.”

“So we need to get away before then?”

“We need to get away as soon as we can.”

All of that depended on Elena locating the prince and setting off their distraction at the perfect moment.

All of this depended on *her*.

A hand fastened around her wrist.

Elena was about to cry out when she turned and saw Pip’s face, hastily dressed in a half-buttoned uniform. Her scream softened into a smile, and he drew her into a nearby alcove. He looked at her like he was surprised to see her, and before either

of them could utter a word, they drew together in a kiss that whispered of other, baser things. It made Elena feel like a glass in a vice, destined to break at the slightest pressure.

Pip drew back. “Come upstairs at the end of your shift,” he asked her. “To the room you were staying in. I’ve commandeered it again.”

A room. A bedroom.

“Planned another little ball for us, have you?”

Pip cupped her face. “I’ll dance away the night with you, if you wish,” he said. “Just—promise me you’ll come?”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to sneak away—”

“Ask the guard at the door for Susan. She’ll get you up.”

Elena swallowed. She was in no mind to say no. This was her last chance, after all. Her last chance to say goodbye, to be with him…

To be with him.

Why was she hesitant?

“All right,” she said, before she could lose her nerve. “I’ll be there.”

Pip’s grin widened, overtaking his whole face. She could never have imagined a simple acceptance creating such joy.

He kissed her again. “Tonight, then,” he said. He brushed her knuckles against his lips, and disappeared.



At the end of her shift, Elena went up to one of the guards on duty and politely asked for Susan. She waited by the door, trying to be still. A part of her wanted to bolt. She didn't want this to be the last time they saw each other. She didn't want there *ever* to be a last time.

Finally, Susan arrived. She smiled at Elena, nodded at the guard, and escorted her to the upstairs room. Pip had yet to appear. The room was largely as she remembered it. There were no rose petals scattered across the furnishings, no gift baskets like in her old romance novels. Nothing that suggested he was expecting anything from her.

It made her want him even more.

Finally, Pip appeared, carrying a silver tray filled with wine, glasses, and a golden envelope. She barely noticed what he was carrying. Her eyes were too fixed on his face.

He laid down the tray on the table, and crossed the room to her. "Hi," he said.

"Hi."

They both chuckled, their laughs fringed with silent nerves.

"I've been trying all day to come up with something to say to you," Pip admitted. "I am coming up rather short."

“Me too.”

He took a deep breath. “I… I really like you, Elena.”

“Me too. You, I mean. I like you. Not me. I’m all right, I suppose.”

Pip laughed. “You are so, so much better than ‘all right’. You are the kindest, sweetest, most talented person I have ever met—”

“You are all those things too, Pip.”

“Am I? Would you mind telling my grandmother that? She’s constantly complaining that I—”

Elena kissed him.

“Right,” he said, “perhaps now is… not the time to be talking about my grandmother.”

“I could listen to your talk about anything until your voice turned hoarse with age or the world was dust around us,” Elena whispered, surprised by the sound of her own words.

Pip’s eyes widened. He was surprised too. “I can talk all night, if you wish.”

Elena blushed. “I can’t stay the night,” she told him. “My stepmother—”

She still needed to go home and grab her belongings before meeting the rebels before the ball tomorrow night. If the Baroness decided to punish her for being out all night, if she somehow stopped her from meeting them at the rendezvous… the consequences could be disastrous for everyone.

Including Pip.

Oh, gods and gears, how she wanted to tell him everything.

But she couldn't risk it.

"Right," Pip said, looking mildly disappointed.

"I still have a few hours."

"A few hours…" He stroked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Gears, Elena, how is any amount of time with you supposed to be enough?"

Elena's heart raced. She drew him in for another kiss, her arms circling round his neck. His hands went to her waist, bunching into her clothes, as the kiss grew and trembled inside her, rumbling like thunder. They backed into the table, upsetting the glasses—

"Perhaps we should have a drink—" he suggested.

"No," she murmured in his mouth. She didn't want to imbibe anything but *him.*

Pip placed his hands down on the table to steady himself, his hands brushing against something. He sighed, pulling away, holding up the golden envelope.

"I should at least give you this," he said.

"What is it?"

"Open it."

Elena took it, peeling back the seal and removing a small oblong card from the inside. She stared down at the writing on it, certain it must be a mistake.

It was a one way ticket to Navarra.

Leaving the day after tomorrow.

“But this… how did you…”

She couldn’t use it, could she? Could she stay in the city for a day after liberating the prince? Would any trains even be leaving after the events of tomorrow?

Well, they would leave eventually. The ticket would be honoured.

But how had Pip secured it in the first place?

She looked up at him, searching for an explanation. He couldn’t possibly have afforded it himself, not on a servant’s salary. He must have connections, be owed a favour, something—

Pip stared back at her, registering her confusion. “I need to tell you something—”

“Don’t,” she said, claiming his mouth with hers. “Don’t tell me anything that might break this moment. Just one night, Pip. One night. Please.”

Whatever it was that Pip had been about to tell her, he clearly decided it could wait. His hands were on her again, roaming and teasing, grabbing at the laces on her bodice, stroking her thighs.

“Just to be clear,” he said, his lips against her neck, “when you say ‘one night,’ do you mean—”

“I don’t want to be crude,” she whispered, body arching over the table, “but I want you, Pip. All of you.”

“So… sex?”

Elena laughed. She had not imagined that *he* would be the one to sound nervous about it. “Yes. Sex.”

“Excellent,” he said, removing his shirt, “just so we’re clear.”

“Have you got… precautions?”

“Will you judge me for being presumptuous if I say yes?”

Elena laughed. “I will not,” she said. “Responsible men are very attractive.”

Elena stumbled up to help him peel back his clothing, not wanting to separate from his skin, not for a second. How could it be that simple *flesh* felt so good, that the warmth of his body licked across her own like fireworks skating across the sky? His mouth came back to her neck, hot and desperate, his whispered words caresses on her throat. She could hardly understand what he was saying, though he might have been speaking another language altogether.

She raked her fingers down his back.

“Gears and garters,” he hissed against her. “Do that again.”

She did, pushing him back to the bed as she did so. He stumbled, turning as they reached the mattress, and landing on top of her. He grinned sheepishly, as if he still couldn’t believe

this was happening, and his fingers went to her bodice with trembling hands.

"Sorry," he said, as he fiddled with her laces, "it's been a while since I… Well. I don't do this often."

"Me neither." *I don't do this ever.*

She helped him peel back her bodice and shirt, then divided from him to remove her trousers alone, and then, barely even thinking, she took her underwear off too.

She stood in the room, half shocked, fully amazed.

She was naked in front of him. He could see every inch of her. All hairs and lumps and bruises and burns. Every scar. Every molecule of her was bare before him.

Pip's eyes widened. He swallowed, almost painfully, and shifted off the bed to remove his own.

His body was pale and beautiful and ordinary, lean and firm, smooth. All apart from the rather erect penis that blinked at her.

She tried not to laugh. She had little experience with naked men, but she knew that one wasn't supposed to laugh. They did look very odd though. How did anyone avoid it?

"You can still change your mind," Pip told her.

Elena drew herself towards him, folding herself around his body. "I am never changing my mind about you."

Pip let out a quiet moan, as if no matter what she had already done with him—or what she was about to do to him—

nothing would bring him more pleasure than the words she'd just uttered.

She eclipsed his mouth with hers and slowly, steadily, they drifted back towards the bed. Pip hovered over her, his body a quiet, trembling cage.

"Are you afraid?" she asked him.

"Nervous, maybe," he said. "You?"

This might have been the perfect moment to tell him it was her first time, but she couldn't bring herself to. He might think she wasn't ready, or be worried about disappointing her, or even have silly, old-fashioned, gentlemanly thoughts about taking her virginity.

There was nothing to take—only something to be gained.

"Not of you," she assured him, "I'm just—"

"Don't do this often? Me neither." He kissed her neck, but the kisses soon descended, down her breasts, her belly, drifting to her thighs. "I love these," he admitted, as he lifted one of her legs to wrap around his neck. "I've been doing my best not to stare at them for a very long time."

"You can stare," Elena told him. "You have my full permission to stare."

"Oh?" said Pip, with a coyness she did not usually expect from him, "and what else have I permission to do?"

He let out a slow, gentle breath that curled against her insides, stirring her like embers in a fire and splitting her

thoughts like starlight.

“Anything,” she said, “anything you want to do.”

“No,” he whispered. “What do *you* want to do?”

Her mouth turned dry, her thoughts spiralling. *I do not know. I do not know what I want. Just you, you, you.*

But his breath was still spiralling inside her, soft and tempted. She loved his lips on hers. What about putting them in other places?

“Kiss me,” she demanded. “Kiss me—right there.”

“Here?” said Pip, deliberately miss-aiming and pressing her lips to her inner thigh, “or *here?*”

He raised his lips to her soft, delicate centre, his tongue licking the underside, slow and steady at first, and then faster and faster as she cried out, her hands balling into the bedsheets, her thoughts fracturing—

She was overloaded with sensation, splitting and dividing and crashing into pieces, there on the bed beneath the cosmic pressure of Pip’s touch. She cried out again, rushing senseless words, unable to piece together a single syllable although his name raptured inside her.

When it was over, he slipped back on top of her, grinning.

“And you worry you have no talent,” she gasped.

“I don’t exactly go around advertising *that* one.”

“I can’t see why not. It might make you very popular.”

Pip laughed, his gaze catching hers and lingering there as softly as a kiss. Elena stared up at him.

“I want you inside me,” she told him.

Pip’s grin only widened. He grabbed her thighs and positioned himself at her entrance, asking her once more if she was ready, and Elena could only gasp—yes, yes, of course she was—and with one swift thrust, Pip was inside her. She let out a cry. More out of shock than anything else, and Pip looked down at her, checking she was all right, but she urged him on, begging him to continue.

A hand tangled in hers. The other braced at her hip, gathering her next to him as he moved in and out in ragged strokes. His hair flopped over his forehead in damp, sweaty curls. Heat spread inside her once more, and Pip drew back his fingers to work at her apex again, thumb rubbing in tight, tiny circles. Stars blistered on the ceiling, and Elena found herself floating and falling all at once as Pip came inside her and collapsed into her arms, grinning against her neck.



Elena lay in Pip's arms; one of his hands stroking her hair, the other slung around her waist. Their knees knocked together, the sheets tangled up around them. She pressed her head against his chest and tried to count his heartbeats rather than the clock. For years, she had found joy and comfort in the cold rhythm of gears and cogs, but nothing—truly nothing—beat the feeling of his warm and beating heart.

She tried to memorise the sound, making silly thoughts about recreating it with metal long after he was gone from her, knowing that it would not be the same.

The ticking of the clock grew louder.

"I want to ask you something," said Pip, his fingers still in her hair, "but I'm worried about it coming out wrong."

"I am not easily upset."

"Was that your first time?"

Elena squeaked, pulling back and covering her face with her hands. "Was it that obvious?"

“No!” Pip’s hands hovered around her, brushing her head, her arms. “No, you just… you seemed a bit nervous and surprised but… gears and garters, this is coming out all wrong.” He took her hands, squeezing them tightly. He took a deep, steadying breath. “It was wonderful. And I think you enjoyed it too?”

“Yes, very much so.”

He shook his head. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Honestly, I was afraid you wouldn’t do it if you knew it was my first time. That you’d…”

“That I’d what?”

“That you might think that I would think it meant something else.”

“Oh?” he raised an eyebrow. “What did it mean, then?”

“I…” Elena paused. It would all change, after tonight. There was nothing to lose by telling him the truth. “I like you, Pip. I really like you.”

“But?”

“Does there have to be a but?” She sighed, lying back down in his arms. “I was afraid you wouldn’t want to do it if I told you it was my first time because you’d be held back by old-fashioned notions, or that I was trying to… Oh, I don’t know! I feel so foolish now.”

Pip kissed her brow. “You are not foolish,” he told her. “And I’m glad I know now.” He wrapped his arms around her.

“I don’t want to go.”

“I don’t want you to leave.”

Then don’t let me, she wanted to beg him. *Take me home with you instead.*

But if he asked her to come with him, she’d have to say no. She’d made a promise to the rebels. They couldn’t do it without her, and she didn’t see her being able to kidnap the prince and return to Pip’s side afterwards like nothing had happened. She’d be noticed, questioned, interrogated—

Unless she told him. Unless he helped her. Unless he came with *her.*

But that was too much of an ask, too big a risk. One that she couldn’t afford to take and wondered if she’d regret her whole life not risking anyway.

“Pip?” she whispered.

“Yes?”

“In another life, I would have spent mine happily beside you.”

Pip stared at her as if he couldn’t quite believe the words she was saying, like some great monument and sprung up between them at her whispered confession.

“I would have spent all of mine with you, too.”

“I… I don’t want to say goodbye.”

“Me neither,” he admitted, clutching her more tightly. “Me neither, me neither. Elena, I—”

But before he could finish his sentence, Elena collapsed into noisy sobs, curling herself further into his chest, as if she could press herself into him and never, ever return. *I don't have to go, I don't have to leave, no one can make me.*

Pip started to cry too, his tears dripping into her hair, his fingers clutching onto her so tightly she felt she might break.

"I want to go with you," she said. "But I can't, I can't, *I can't…*"

They spent their final hour together weeping.



Pip watched Elena descend down the lift, her face still stained with tears, and felt his own heart going with her like it was a physical thing being stretched to the point of breaking. His entire chest felt like it was being pulled away.

Don't go, he thought desperately, *don't go.*

A part of him had been hoping she'd see the ticket and express disappointment that it wasn't one to Toulouse. Maybe, just maybe, if it had been anything other than sheer joy, he'd have found the courage to ask her to come with him. To tell her who he really was.

He'd tried to. He'd come so close—

But at the final moment, he'd lost his nerve, distracted by her kisses, her body… and when he had a moment to ask her again, she'd cried and said she wanted to go with him, but couldn't. *Couldn't.*

It was Navarra she needed, not him.

He could still feel it against him, the impression of her. It would not be long until that feeling faded. How long until he forgot her smile, the sound of her voice, her dark eyes and honey-soft sweetness?

You'll never forget that, Pip reminded himself. *Not for as long as you live.*

He didn't even have a picture of her.

He made his way back to the palace slowly, his chest still hurting, half-struggling to breathe. Pip tried to console himself with the thought that at least he'd met her, and least they'd had that night, at least he'd always know that someone in the world had loved him for simply being him.

Loved.

She'd not said the word. Not quite. How had that managed to slip away from them? It was implied, of course, whispered beneath the words, the kisses, the caresses…

She told him she would have spent her life with him. That had to mean that she did, right? And he'd returned those words, if nothing else. She had to know. She *had to.*

Nevertheless, as he made his way back to his room, Pip couldn't shake the feeling he'd messed up quite spectacularly,

that he'd lost the chance to say everything important and settled for satisfying carnal lust instead.

Sometimes, words mattered more than actions.

He slipped inside his room, discarding his boots and the borrowed uniform that he would never need to wear again. He sat down on the bed and stared at his hands with the intensity of a guilty criminal.

Somewhere in the night or morning—all time had bled together—Susan came and found him there. She took his hands in hers and held them until light filtered into the room, not speaking, not daring.

"I didn't tell her that I loved her," Pip whispered.

And he would never get another chance to.



As long as Elena lived, she thought that she would never forget the look in Pip's eyes as the lift moved down, taking her from him forever. His eyes still glistened with tears, his shirt untucked beneath his hastily pulled on jacket, and his hands were wedged deep inside his pockets as if he didn't trust them not to spring out around her and fasten her back to him.

Take me back, she begged, even as the lift lurched, *don't let me go.*

In that moment, she felt like she'd give up everything to stay. Give up Navarra, give up the prince's life, doom the city and all the mechanical kingdoms—whatever it took to be with him.

But that was not who she was, was not the person he'd come to care for. Maybe even love.

He didn't say it. Why didn't he say it?

Why didn't you?

It was too late now. Too late to do anything but crawl back to her cold, hard bed, her body already forgetting the shape of his.

Somehow, fitfully, she slept. Somehow, when morning came, she ate. She made breakfast for the rest of the family. She cleaned the kitchen for the final time. She ran errands for them, plastering on a smile to keep herself together. There seemed to be an endless list of tasks in preparation for the ball, a hundred things to be done, dresses to be ironed, ribbons to be bought, shoes to be cleaned and polished. The Baroness swept from room to room, criticising the dusty shelves in the same breath she demanded that Elena made Ivanka's hair "bigger, bolder". It was impossible to keep up.

"I wish that you were coming with us," sighed Mariah at one point, when she could be certain the Baroness was busy elsewhere. "You *should* be coming with us."

Elena smiled. "Believe me, I shall be where I am supposed to be tonight."

She hoped that was true. She hoped all this was part of a great plan, the reason she'd been born.

But as much as she convinced herself that that was the case, she couldn't help but wonder why the Gods had brought her to Pip, why they had made her fall in love with him, only to part them so soon.

Faith, Elena, said a voice not unlike her parents'. *Trust in it. It will turn out all right in the end.*

Elena wished that instead of faith, she had the bravery of someone like Snowdrop. That sounded more useful at the moment.

She turned her attention instead to the tasks at hand, determined to focus on those and not the loudness of the ticking clock. She only had a short window to escape the apartment. Thankfully, the Baroness and the rest of the guests were due to arrive at the palace long before Princess Sofia, but that still did not leave much time between the Baroness leaving and when Elena was supposed to meet the rebels to apprehend Sofia's train.

"There's no way for me to get away before then," she'd told the others. "I'm sorry."

Snowdrop had waved her hand, insisting that the hour's gap would be sufficient, although Buttercup recoiled at the idea of having to dress Elena up in such a haste.

"You're brilliant, Buttercup," Snowdrop had assured him. "You'll manage."

Finally, everyone was ready. They stood in the parlour in their finery, great spectacles of silk and ribbons, preening in front of the mirror in their masks of gold and silver.

“Such a shame we couldn’t find a gown for you,” the Baroness crooned, not looking in her direction. “But I’m not sure any dress would have *quite* done you justice.”

Elena pursed her lips, biting back a smile. “Such a shame indeed.”

The Baroness snapped her fan shut, as if registering that the barb hadn’t hit as intended. “Make good use of this free night,” she said. “I want to see my reflection in those pans by morning.”

It would have been easy to say *yes, of course*—to smile coyly, to agree, “yes, Stepmother, I will make very good use of tonight” but that prayer for bravery had clearly worked.

She would never see her stepmother after tonight.

She could say whatever she wanted.

“No,” Elena whispered.

The Baroness turned to face her, her hold on the fan sharpening, making it look like one elongated finger.

“*No?*”

“No,” Elena reiterated, trying to make the word solid. “You will be at the ball. I don’t want to scrub pans.”

Ivanka sucked in a breath. Her eyes widened underneath her plated mask. She held up her hands as if to say *no, no, stop,*

what are you doing?

The Baroness' eyes widened too, but they were beyond a warning. "You do not *want* to scrub pans?" she hissed. "Well, Elena, if only the world worked like that. But we all must do things we do not want. I did not *want* to be without a husband, I do not *want* to live in this dusty apartment. I do not *want* an ungrateful child under my roof—"

"I am not a child," Elena said. "And I have no reason to be grateful."

"No reason to be—" venom coated every syllable of the Baroness' words. "I have looked after you, housed you with us —"

"I have *provided* for you," Elena went on, "I've worked for you, broken myself for you, worn myself to the bone looking after *you.* I am not the ungrateful one, Stepmother. You are."

Quick as a serpent, the Baroness struck her fan across Elena's face. Her cheek stung, but she did not flinch.

"Go to your room," the Baroness hissed.

Elena held firm. "No."

Before anything else could happen, there was a knock at the door; the carriage had arrived.

The Baroness smiled. "Very well," she said, "enjoy your solitude, Elena."

Elena tried not to show her confusion, tried to still her brow to stop from frowning. There was no reason for the Baroness

to smile, to reason for her not to strike her again.

But the Baroness offered no explanation, no other remark. She crossed the room, her daughters trailing behind her. Mariah cast one final look over her shoulder, half pity, half puzzlement, and then the door closed softly behind them, and they were gone.

Elena waited a long while to release her breath, hardly daring to believe it.

They were gone. It was over. She'd survived it.

She turned to the clock. There was no time to waste.

She ran to her room, pulling on her boots and coat and grabbing her bag. She turned to look around the room, thinking that perhaps it deserved some sort of goodbye, and then swiftly changed her mind. There was nothing here to say goodbye to, nothing she would miss.

She went to the front door, seizing the handle—

It wouldn't turn.

Elena's stomach dropped.

Her stepmother had locked her in.

No.

She forced her thoughts back into order. She couldn't panic, not yet. She wasn't late. Perhaps there was a spare key around…

Not in the hallway or kitchen, where Elena could have taken it any time. But perhaps in the Baroness' room?

She tore through the apartment, flinging open the door, racing through the Baroness' bedside tables. She found no keys there, just faded books, a worn silver pen, a few hairpins, a couple of secreted chocolates—

And a picture of the Baroness on her second wedding day.

Papa.

Elena was sure that the Baroness had destroyed all evidence of her father ever existing, but for whatever reason, she had kept this. He smiled at her in faded black and white, one arm around his new wife, the other around Elena's. She remembered that day perfectly. The warmth of the Navarran dome, the honeysuckle in the bouquets, the rustle of silk from her dress—

And her father's hand on her shoulder, warm and bright. Strange, how a picture could reach through the years and touch you, though she was far from that girl in ribbons now.

Elena peeled off the back of the frame and tore her father's image from the Baroness' side, stuffing it into her pocket. She couldn't take her father's empty ashes with her, but she could take this. She could free him from the Baroness like she would free herself.

Free herself.

Finding no keys in the bedside unit and nothing in the dresser, Elena gave up the search. It didn't matter. She didn't need a key. She had her tools in her bag—a key to anywhere.

If she had enough time.

The clock on the mantelpiece chimed. Elena picked it up and hurled it to the floor. It smashed into a hundred glittering pieces: dented cogs and springs, shards of mother-of-pearl.

“Oh, do be quiet.”

She emptied out her bag and unrolled her toolkit, starting at the lock mechanism with her screwdriver and cursing the rusty screws. No matter. She could do it. She had no choice. She had to.

Time, time, time, it ticked soundlessly onwards as she picked and twisted and hissed and swore.

Come on, come on!

One of the screws had melded into the lock. That took the longest to extract. Another had almost dissolved into dust. Several of the lock springs seemed to actively scuttle away from her, retreating into the mechanism. But metal would not imprison her. No one would. Never again.

Finally, the lock pinged open. It clattered to the floor. The door swung open.

Elena breathed, stuffing her bag back together and racing down the stairs, two, three at a time until she reached the streets outside.

Never before had the oily air tasted so much like freedom.



Elena arrived at the door to the rebels' safehouse breathless with her legs on fire. Snowdrop met her at the door, her white face twisted into a smile. It was clear she'd been worried. The frown looked etched onto her face.

"We thought you might have changed your mind."

"I'm not sure Buttercup would have fit in the dress," Elena said, panting for breath.

"No," Buttercup agreed, nodding his head, "but I do look fabulous in them when the occasion calls…"

Elena stifled her laugh. "How long have we got?"

"Not nearly long enough. But come on. I'll do my best."

He pushed her into a chair and started attacking her hair, affixing pins and stolen hair pieces which gave her the illusion of volume. Dandelion grabbed her face, scrubbing it and painting the visible parts while Snowdrop kept an eye on the time.

“What’s this?” Dandelion asked, examining the mark left by the Baroness’ fan, imprinted on Elena’s cheek.

“Oh,” said Elena, looking down, “my stepmother took offence to something I said.”

Snowdrop marched across the room and titled Elena’s face towards her. Her eyes narrowed. “If you point her out to me at the party, I’ll kill her as we make our escape.”

Elena wasn’t sure she was joking. “Um, that’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t.”

Elena squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. “It’s over now,” was all she could say.

The men applied the rest of her makeup, a few more hairpins were squeezed into place, bags were flung over backs and then suddenly the door was closing with a loud clang and Elena was being pushed out into the streets with her hood drawn up, moving too quickly to be nervous.

“There’s no time to change,” she was told. “We’ll do it on the train.”

The plan had been to get her into the undergarments ahead of their journey, albeit without the hoop skirt which was folded somewhere in Buttercup’s belongings. There was no time for that now, which meant they were cutting into their turnover period later in the night.

But there was nothing for it. The train would not wait.

“Come on,” said Snowdrop. “We need to go.”

The garage door was locked and secured. Elena took a fleeting look at the street as they raced off into the night, certain she would never return.

If you get away with this, you might still have to come back here to lay low for a couple of days until you can use Pip's ticket.

But for some reason that she could not explain, Navarra seemed further away than ever. Holding onto hope that she could use the ticket was a foolish endeavour, and she knew it.

It warmed her back pocket all the same, along with her father's photograph, a reminder that someone, however briefly, had cared about her.

Through the narrow streets they went, past the midnight market and locals peddling their wares. A few streets away, a group of people were having some kind of party—a response to the one going on in the palace. A caterwauling of drums and discordant music stung the air. The city screamed with noises.

Wherever I go next, I hope it's quieter.

If she lived through the night. If any of them did.

They arrived at a door in the side of a wall, blackened with age and smoke and barely discernible from the brick around it. It looked boarded up, although when Dandelion turned the handle and swung it forward, the boards came with it.

"Hurry," Snowdrop said, pushing Elena forward.

They descended into the dark. Someone brought out a lamp. Instructions were rushed in hushed voices, bots hovering

around faces or nestled on top of backpacks.

The noise above them softened to a dull thud, but other sounds thrummed around them. The flickering of lights in the distance, the whir of gears, the rumble of trains below.

“The guard station isn’t far,” Clover told her.

The tunnel soon branched out, and they arrived on an underground platform. At the end of it was a narrow set of stairs leading to a small lit-up room that jutted out over the station.

A single guardsman sat hunched over a dashboard.

“Stay here,” Snowdrop instructed Elena.

Elena did not need to be told twice. Pistols were drawn. Snowdrop went up the steps first, followed by Buttercup. She burst through the door, shoving her revolver in the guardsman’s face.

He gave a loud shriek.

“The train from Navarra,” she bellowed, “divert it to tunnel B-3, or—”

“You’re the rebellion?” he asked.

“Yes.”

The man bent over his desk and hastily began punching buttons. “I’m not going to stop you,” he said. “My sister died in one of the outer ring factories. Reckon you lot might be on the right side of it all.”

Snowdrop smiled.

Maybe this will be easy after all, Elena hoped, even though she knew this part was probably the easiest one.

“Stationmaster to Petragrad 19:11,” the guard spoke over the radio, “I’m diverting your train into tunnel B-3. There is a minor disturbance on the main track.”

“Roger that,” spoke another voice, one laced with an accent so familiar and faraway that it made Elena’s insides ache, “revised ETA?”

“The delay should take no more than, ah…”

Snowdrop held up her fingers.

“Ten minutes,” the guardsman confirmed.

“Roger that, stationmaster.”

The radio went silent.

Snowdrop turned back to the guard. “We’ll need to tie you up,” she said. “Just in case you…”

“Yes, yes, I won’t struggle.” He held out his hands. “Don’t be too rough.”

Clover came forward to tie him up, muttering about how he wished all their hostages were so compliant and making quick work of the knots. That done, he scooted back down the steps to the others, where they dropped onto the train tracks and scuttled forward in the pitch black.

“What are the chances the guards on the Narvarran train are on our side?” asked Clover.

“Slim,” said Dandelion.

"*Very* slim," Elena agreed.

The train was the most unknown factor. They had no map of it, no knowledge of the number of guards. They only knew that Princess Sofia was travelling solo, without her parents. There would be a driver on board, probably two. A maid, most likely. At least four guards.

Too many to overpower them. All they had was the advantage of surprise.

That didn't fill Elena with joy.

Several turns later, lights appeared in the distance. They turned off their own. The Narravan train stood still on the abandoned platform, bronze and gleaming.

Elena held her breath.

"Two guards on the platform," Snowdrop whispered, her voice so quiet she was barely talking at all. "Two drivers in the front, too."

"Can we get to the drivers first?"

"Yes," she said. "Bear right. Stay out of the guards' vision. Buttercup, cover us."

Buttercup aimed his pistol. "Understood."

The remaining three rebels took to the right, Elena sandwiched between them. Snowdrop approached first, waiting for another train to rumble somewhere in the distance, allowing her the distraction to tear open the door and aim her

pistol at the drivers. Clover shot up behind her, aiming at the second.

Elena could only catch a glimpse of their pale, terrified faces as Snowdrop cocked her gun and placed her finger to her lips. “No one has died yet tonight,” she said, “and I would like to keep it that way. The choice is now in your hands. Back away from the controls.”

Neither driver objected. Dandelion scuttled forward to bind and gag them, and left two of the bots—the winged, cat-like one, and the one shaped like a bee—to watch over them.

“You move, they’ll strike,” he told the drivers.

Elena doubted that was true, but by the look on the drivers’ face, neither of them was going to risk it.

Everyone shuffled out of the train. Snowdrop ducked under the carriage, the others following. Elena crouched on the floor, watching as they scuttled along the tracks towards the guards’ position. Another rumble overhead and they struck, grabbing the guards’ feet, dragging them onto the tracks and wrestling their weapons away from them.

“How many guards are inside the train?” Snowdrop hissed at one of them. “How many?”

The guard glared at her, but Snowdrop pushed her muzzle under her chin. “If you don’t answer, I will pull this trigger. I imagine it will serve as very good motivation for your buddy over there.”

The guard's glare darkened, but she swallowed. "*Four,*" she hissed. "But if you harm the Princess—"

"It isn't my wish to harm anyone," Snowdrop followed, retrieving a rag from her pocket to stuff inside the guard's mouth. "But if I have to kill one to save a thousand, so be it."

The guards now bound and gagged, the rebels regrouped.

"Four guards inside," Snowdrop told the others.

"Equal odds," said Clover.

"I prefer it when they favour us. There's the princess too, probably a maid. They may well fight back."

"Ideas?"

"Grab the princess. Take her hostage. The rest are sure to comply then."

"Ready?"

"Ready."

Buttercup burst in first, knocking over two of the guards immediately. A scream went up from the corner; Princess Sofia. A bullet cracked through the air. Elena heard someone else cry out. Princess Sofia was still screaming, barely drawing breath.

Elena couldn't bear to do nothing. She climbed up into the carriage, scurrying to the corner where Princess Sofia was cowering behind a chair.

"It's all right," Elena tried to assure her, "they aren't going to hurt you—"

Sofia did not seem to believe her, and why would she? One of her guards was bleeding on the floor, her maid had gone silent with shock, and the train roof was riddled with bullet holes.

Calming her down was not an option.

Elena sighed, slipping a hand into her bag and removing one of her screwdrivers. She grabbed Sofia and placed it against her neck.

“Cease your fire!” she screamed. “Or I drive this through the Princess’ neck!”

Sofia let out a tiny whimper, but her guards stopped firing immediately.

“Drop your weapons,” Elena instructed, wondering who under the Dome could possibly be speaking. Not her, definitely not her. She’d never threatened anyone in her life.

The guards dropped their weapons. Elena pointed to one of them. “You,” she said. “See to your friend. He’s bleeding.”

The guard scuttled forward, placing a hand over the guard’s wound. It was a shot to the arm. Not fatal—or so Elena hoped.

The rebels reached into their bags for more rope, and started to bind the others.

“Why are you doing this?” Princess Sofia whimpered.

“We don’t want to,” said Snowdrop, coming forward to tie her hands together. “We’re trying to save lives here. This is just the best way to do it. We don’t have time to explain.”

“We have tried asking nicely,” Clover said, to no one in particular. “*Please, your majesties, don’t let us starve. Please stop killing us and turning us into coal.* Hasn’t really worked so far.”

The princess trembled. “That’s just a rumour.”

“If only it were,” said Snowdrop, directing the princess into a seat. “This will all make sense to you one day. I hope.”

Princess Sofia said nothing, tears trickling down her cheeks. Elena’s chest ached at the sight.

“Come,” said Buttercup, steering her into the corner. “We don’t have time to dawdle.”

The guards from outside were dragged inside and deposited in the seats. Dandelion grabbed the drivers into the carriage too, leaving Clover to jerk the train back to life. They ploughed along the tracks, Buttercup stripping Elena of her clothes and tugging her into the gown. There was no privacy, no time to be shy.

“Wait a minute,” said Sofia, “are you trying to dress her up… as *me?*”

“You got a problem with that?” Snowdrop snapped.

“It will never work.”

“Why wouldn’t it? No one has seen you in years.”

“You can’t just put a commoner in a dress and call her a princess!”

Snowdrop laughed, as if the whole idea was highly amusing to her. “Looks can be deceiving, can’t they?”

“I wasn’t always a commoner,” Elena told her. “We used to know each other, you know? Many years ago, I was the daughter of Baron Hernandez.”

Princess Sofia’s eyes widened, sparking with recognition. “Elena?” she asked tentatively. “What happened to you?”

“The same thing that happens to everyone out here,” Elena said, as Buttercup fixed the mask in place.

A tannoy whispered through the carriage. “We’re two minutes out,” came Clover’s voice. “Get in position.”

The guards were taken into the adjoining carriage, deprived of their robes. Buttercup—who couldn’t fit into the guards’ uniforms—slid into the front to trade places with Clover. Elena turned to see Snowdrop standing beside her, dressed not as a lady’s maid, but as a painted automaton with a porcelain face. The illusion was so startling that she buckled. Snowdrop’s sleeves had been reinforced with gears at the elbows, her long white gloves hiding human fingers, her lace ruff disguising her neck. Only her ink-black hair remained.

“What?” Snowdrop asked.

“I just… I didn’t realise you’d be wearing a disguise.”

“I thought it best,” Snowdrop said. “Wouldn’t want to be recognised.”

“By who?”

Snowdrop didn’t answer. The train slowed to a stop. Elena was pulled in front of the door, Dandelion and Clover in guards’ uniforms standing on either side of her. She sucked in a deep breath—

And promptly released it when she saw her own reflection in the polished doors of the carriage.

She’d noticed that Buttercup had added a few bronze embellishments to the petals of her dress, but she hadn’t seen the full effect. She barely recognised herself. Gone was the grease-stained, soot-skinned girl with the gears, and in her place stood a princess in emerald, cerulean and glittery bronze. She looked like a fairy princess, the fake curls in her hair fluttering around a mask that gave her the appearance of a feathered butterfly. Gold paint had been smeared over her eyelids, her lips and cheeks tinged with rouge.

No one would recognise her like this.

Snowdrop leaned forward and squeezed her fingers into hers. “You can do this,” she whispered.

For the first time, Elena believed her.

Then the doors opened, Snowdrop yanked back her hand, and Elena stepped out onto the platform.



Their group was escorted out of the station by four armed guards from the palace. No one asked them any questions, or said anything to Elena whatsoever other than welcoming her to Petragrad and dropping into perfect bows. Elena politely inclined her head, uttered a quiet thank you, and followed their lead.

Outside of the station, a glass carriage in the shape of a pumpkin was waiting to escort them the short distance to the palace lifts. Dandelion helped her ascend into it, before hurrying to the back with Clover. Elena wondered if she'd speak to them again before the night was over.

Just follow their lead, she told herself, *do as you're told. You're good at that.*

The smoke slippers hummed on her feet, reminding her that at some point tonight, she would need to act alone.

Snowdrop will tell you when.

"Why a pumpkin, I wonder?" Snowdrop asked, as the carriage trundled through the streets. She kept her voice low, no doubt concerned about the driver overhearing them; automatons were not supposed to speak.

"It's the national vegetable of Navarra," Elena told her. "A symbol of our agriculture."

"Huh. I should really know that."

Elena frowned. "Why?"

The carriage gave a slight lurch. Snowdrop clung to her seat. If she fell, she'd be exposed as human. Elena wondered if

this disguise was as well thought out as Snowdrop seemed to think it was. How long could she act like a machine?

The carriage slowed in front of the elevators. Crowds had gathered around to witness the finery, held at bay by silver ropes and a heavy guard presence. Dandelion and Clover disembarked and helped the women down. Once more, no one questioned them as they were ushered into the lifts, although the men were required to surrender their weapons.

No one checked Elena. No one dared. To lay a hand on a princess of Navarra was unthinkable.

They headed into lifts along with two guards from the palace. No one spoke as they rose, not even as the palace appeared, a glistening golden spectacle shining against an ink blue backdrop.

Elena wondered if Princess Sofia would gasp. It was certainly a splendid sight compared to the more humble Navarran palace, but she decided against it. Let the guards think she was used to splendour.

The lift ground to a halt. Elena followed the guards off, walking up a path lined with light. Other guests were making their own way towards the main doors, ladies in silk and feathers, satin and lace, men in tailored suits with brass pocket watches and pressed shirts. Everyone was shiny and beautiful.

And tonight, Elena was too. Tonight, she was one of them.

If only for a little while.

She really hoped they found the Toulousian prince as soon as possible, and got out of here as fast as they could.

The walk to the doors seemed to take forever. It seemed completely unnatural for her to stroll up the marble steps when she'd spent weeks skirting in and out through the back doors, but now she stood atop them, staring in at the great gilded ballroom where she'd fixed automatons only two days ago.

"Announcing Her Royal Highness, Princess Sofia of Navarra!" called the master of ceremonies.

For a moment, everyone in the ballroom halted, turning in her direction. Trumpets sounded, as they would for any royal visitor. Dandelion and Clover removed themselves from her side, slinking off into the crowds, and Elena descended down the steps with only Snowdrop trailing behind her.

She walked across the ballroom, heads bowing as she passed, all the way to the golden throne at the end on a raised dais.

Elena was glad of her mask. She wore it like a shield, the only protection she had in the room against a sea of glittering sharks.

Ahead of her sat Queen Mira, resplendent in a gown gold and studded from head to toe in gems. For the first time in six years, Elena stared at her face. It was porcelain white, as smooth as cream, heavily made up in rouge and glitter in the shape of a mask. She was beautiful, but it was the kind of beauty that could only be purchased, as soft and welcoming as an icicle.

“Princess Sofia,” the Queen said, in a careful, measured voice. “How glad we are that you have finally returned to our kingdom.”

“It is an honour,” Elena said, dropping into a bow. Gods and gears, it had been years since she’d had to bow in a dress. She wished she’d practised that rather than all this dancing.

Queen Mira smiled. “No politics tonight,” she said, “we shall save that until the morning. Please, come, drink, be merry. I believe the the Toulousian Prince has requested your first dance of the evening…”

She gestured to a young gentleman standing at the side of her. Elena had not paid anyone else much attention. The dais was crowded with nobles, and it would have been rude to give anyone but the Queen attention at first.

She turned now, and her heart almost stopped.

Standing beside the queen in a pristine pearl and silver suit —wearing the red Toulousian sash and a simple mask of white lace that did nothing to hide his face—was *Pip.*



There's been some kind of mistake, Elena was certain. *Pip isn't the prince. Maybe they just look very similar. Perhaps your mind is playing tricks on you. Maybe the real prince hates balls, and he's asked Pip to take his place…*

But the nobles would have to be in on it, and somehow, that didn't seem likely.

Pip descended down the steps towards her, smiling in his distinctly Pip-like way.

This wasn't real. This couldn't be happening.

And yet…

She had never seen the Toulousian Prince. She'd seen so many of the others, but not him.

Suddenly, it all made sense. No wonder she'd been given a room in the palace. No wonder he'd been able to afford her a ticket back to Navarra. No wonder he could summon food fit for royalty.

Because he was.

Pip was Prince Phillippe.

And Elena was an idiot.

“Princess Sofia.” Pip bent to kiss her hand, the rough fingers he’d clung to days before hidden beneath silk gloves. “Welcome to Petragrad. May I have the honour of your first dance?”

Elena could not summon her voice, but she knew she had to do *something.* She managed a polite nod. Pip smiled, and slipped his hand around her waist. She tried not to gasp as the music changed, and the waltz began.

“I’m sorry,” Pip said, as he swung her around the dancefloor, “I daresay you’d rather be resting after your long journey. How was it?”

Elena swallowed. “It was… good, Prince Phillippe. I thank you.”

Pip shuddered, only slightly.

“Something wrong?”

“Your voice…” he whispered.

Elena nearly missed a step. Her voice. The mask might disguise her face, but the voice…

“Forgive me, it is very beautiful,” he continued, although his gaze was over her shoulder.

What was going on? Was he hearing her, missing her? What had she even been to him—some kind of game? A conquest?

Why hadn't he told her who he really was?

She tried to tell herself it didn't matter, that there were other things at stake here, namely rescuing—

Oh gears, *him.* The Spartan forces were after *him.*

They were going to try to kill Pip.

Elena missed a step, almost tripping. She spotted Snowdrop beside a nearby pillar, trying to stay still and inanimate, nearly lurch forwards at her stumble, but Pip was there first, pulling her upright and sweeping her away to the buffet table.

"You must be famished after your long journey," he said, passing her a glass of wine, "I should have gotten you refreshment beforehand. I apologise. The Queen rather put me on the spot."

Me too.

Elena drank her wine, trying to recover her senses. She needed to speak to Snowdrop and explain this new development. Or maybe just get Pip to a private space. She could tell him who she really was, explain that his life was in danger… Maybe she wouldn't even need to cause a distraction at all.

If he believed her. If he wasn't too distracted by the fact she wasn't who she said she was either.

"Our families are very keen for us to make an acquaintance," Pip continued, when Elena remained mute.

"And you are not?" Elena asked, finally finding her voice.

Pip sighed. He stared at his own glass of wine. He had barely looked at her once since her arrival, never holding her gaze long. “I’m afraid, Princess Sofia, that my heart lies elsewhere, and I’m not sure when, if ever, it will be released.”

Elena’s heart quickened. It was real. Whatever else he had pretended, whatever mask he had hidden behind, he hadn’t lied about that.

Unless there were other girls. Which seemed unlikely. But why was he wearing servant attire when they first met? Maybe it was a game to him—some strange game to seduce servant girls. Maybe he and Prince Nero had concocted it together. Maybe *that’s* why Nero hadn’t reported her—

“It might be best if you just tell your parents I was a horrible slob and you couldn’t stand the sight of me,” Pip carried on. “I don’t mind embarrassing myself in public if you need a few stories to tell.”

Elena stared at him. Once more, her words had vanished.

“Are you quite all right, Princess Sofia?” Pip asked, his face twitching with concern.

“A little tired is all,” she managed. “Forgive me. I need a moment.”

She ducked away from him, searching for the bathrooms. This was madness. Ridiculous. She should just grab him and go. If Sparta struck now—

But she couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t focus.

She ducked away into one of the bathrooms, grabbing hold of the sink to steady herself. She couldn't even lock the door. Someone slipped in beside her—

"Breathe." A gloved hand slid against her back, accompanied by a muffled voice. Snowdrop's. "In, hold, out —"

"It's Pip," Elena gasped.

"What?"

"Pip. He's Prince Phillippe. The whole time. It's been him."

Snowdrop paused, her hand frozen against Elena's back. "Right."

"*Right?*"

"Well, that's good, isn't it? He'll listen to you. If you can just get him alone—"

"I lied to him," Elena whispered. "He lied to *me.*"

Snowdrop waved her hand. "Everyone lies."

"I can't do this."

"Elena, you've already assisted in taking a princess captive and sneaking into a palace. You broke into a general's bedroom. You designed smoke-grenade slippers. You can talk to your boyfriend. Go on."

Elena couldn't think of anything to say to that.

Boyfriend, boyfriend, boyfriend.

Snowdrop sighed. She squeezed Elena's shoulder. "Look at it this way," she told her, "at least you might not have to say goodbye to him after all."

Elena's heart jumped at the possibility, only to quickly sink into her stomach. *But he's a prince,* she realised. *And I'm just me.*

No wonder he didn't invite her to Toulouse with him.

She still didn't quite understand what Pip was doing when he got involved with her, but she trusted that there was a reason. You didn't buy tickets for your conquests. It had been real. It had to be.

She took a deep breath.

"Just give me a minute," she asked Snowdrop. "Go back out there. Don't lose sight of him."

It was impossible to read Snowdrop's face beneath the mask, but Elena imagined she was smiling. "Spoken like a true rebel," she said, and slipped out of the bathroom.

Elena turned to the sink. She yanked off her gloves and ran her hands under the golden taps to cool down. She didn't dare splash her face and risk washing off the make-up. She braced herself against the marble side and breathed in and out carefully, staring at the reflection to remind herself that she was a princess, at least for the night, and she belonged here.

You can do this.

The door clicked open, and a crying girl in a silver dress rushed in.

Mariah.

“Oh!” said Mariah, looking up, “I’m so sorry! Your Highness—” She did a quick bow, almost toppling over.

“Steady now,” said Elena, racing over to help her into a chair. “What’s the matter?”

“Oh, please don’t trouble yourself—”

“Please,” said Elena, “dry your tears, and tell me what’s happened.”

“It’s my shoe,” Mariah sniffled. “The heel…” She held up her clenched hand and lifted up her skirt; the heel had fallen straight off.

Elena smiled. “This is fixable,” she said. “Stay here.”

She didn’t have her toolkit, but a pair of nail scissors resting in a painted seashell beside the sink served the part of a screwdriver well. She eased the broken heel from Mariah’s grip. It was designed to slot into place with a couple of screws.

“That’s amazing!” Mariah said, watching her work. “Where did you learn to do that?”

Elena froze. It had not occurred to her that a princess might not know how to use a screwdriver. “Oh,” she said, “it’s just common sense. I’ve broken a lot of shoes in my day, you know!”

Mariah laughed as Elena slipped the shoe back on for her. “Thank you.”

Elena smiled at her.

A sharp rap at the door cut through their conversation, a rap Elena felt in her chest. It sent shivers down her spine. “Mariah!” hissed the Baroness. “Are you quite done, child? I’ve located a servant to assist you—”

“It’s all right, Maman!” Mariah called back. “It’s all fixed.”

“All fixed? How?” The door clicked open. Elena braced herself for the sneer, the look of displeasure, the cutting words—but all that came was a sharp gasp, followed by a hasty bow.

“Your Highness,” the Baroness muttered. “I am so sorry. We did not mean to disturb you—”

“No harm done,” Elena assured her, wanting her to leave as soon as possible.

“If there is any way we can make this—”

Elena waved her hand. “The girl is fine. I will leave you to your evening.”

The Baroness’ face flickered, her eyes searching. Elena froze, wondering if she’d said something wrong, something that had given the Baroness cause to doubt her. But that couldn’t be right. Even *Pip* hadn’t recognised her.

“As you wish, Your Highness,” said the Baroness, ushering Mariah out of the room. “Come, child. Let us leave the princess in peace.”

The door closed behind her. Elena breathed a huge sigh of relief. She tugged her gloves back on and scooted back into the ballroom, searching for Snowdrop. She stood in the shadows, still as ever.

“Recovered?” she whispered under her mask.

Elena nodded. “Pip?”

“He’s by the dais, talking to Prince Nero.”

Elena followed her gaze, letting it rest on Pip. He looked so perfectly at ease here in this glittering world. Why had she not seen it before?

“Look alive,” Snowdrop rushed. “You have company.”

Elena turned, only to find herself face-to-face with the Baroness again, so close that her breath almost brushed the cheek she’d bruised mere hours ago.

“Forgive me,” said the Baroness, holding up a champagne flute, “an offering, for the help you gave my daughter.”

“It was no bother,” Elena said, fighting the urge back away, to run, to flee.

“I’m surprised a royal knows anything about fixing shoes.”

“Do not pretend to know me.”

“Oh,” said the Baroness, “but I do, Your Highness. I lived in Navarra for a time. I frequently attended balls at your palace with my husband, Baron Hernandez.”

She’d attended a handful, far less than Elena, and several years ago. There was no way she recognised her. No way she thought she was anyone else. No way, no way—

“The name rings some bells, but I do not believe we spoke often.”

“No, no that’s true. I think you knew my stepdaughter a little better—Elena?”

Elena froze. *She knows,* a part of her brain screamed. *She doesn’t,* logic reminded her. *She can’t.*

But what was she trying to do otherwise?

“Like I said,” Elena said stiffly, “the name rings a bell, but I can’t put a face to it, I’m afraid.”

“Can you not?” The slightest of smiles twitched in the Baroness’ face. “A pity.”

Elena stared back at her. “I pray you will excuse me.”

Elena walked away from her, clicking for Snowdrop to follow in a way she hoped looked commanding rather than terrified. They crossed the room, settling in a small alcove still in full view of Pip.

“Did she recognise you?” Snowdrop asked.

“I don’t know.”

Snowdrop glanced at Pip. “We need to act. Now. Get over there. Pull him away. Tell him whatever you need to. Get him out into the gardens or *something*. If they find out who you are before—”

Before they kill us all.

The sound seemed to have drained from the room, all sensation following. Elena forced herself to move, to cross the room towards Pip, no longer conscious of anything but his face shining over the crowd like a beacon.

She reached his side. “Prince Phillippe?” she said. “I must speak with you. It is a matter of some urgency.”

Pip looked up, his face dropping, sensing her distress. He made his excuses and stepped towards her. “What is it?”

“I—not here. Too many people… I must speak to you in private—”

A hand pressed against her elbow. Snowdrop. She raised a hand towards the dais, where the Baroness was conversing with none other than the Queen herself, their heads bent conspiratorially together.

“Oh no—”

“Princess,” started Pip, “what’s—”

“That girl!” shrieked the Baroness, pointing straight at Elena. “That girl is no princess. She’s my stepdaughter, Elena Hernandez!”

The music died away. Whispers took its place, rising like a crescendo. Guests murmured, guards started to move—

Pip’s eyes widened, staring. “Elena?” he said. “No, no, that can’t be—”

“Pip,” started Elena, “please, you have to listen, your life is —”

“Seize the imposter!” Mira screamed.

“Now, Cinder!” Snowdrop cried.

Several gasps went up at the voice coming from the porcelain mask, but no one looked more shocked than Prince

Nero. He shifted from his space, moving through the crowd—

He never reached them.

Elena snapped her slippers together, flung them off her feet, and the entire ballroom swamped with smoke.

“This way!” Snowdrop yelled.

“What’s going on—” Pip started.

“Please,” Elena insisted, “Pip, you have to trust me. Your life is in danger. Come with us.”

She couldn’t see his face in the smoke, but she found his hand and seized his fingers. Snowdrop yanked them forward, scuttling through the crowd, diving towards a thin, black space that had opened up in the side of the room.

A servants’ passage. Dandelion and Clover were waiting for them, pressing into their hands weapons that they’d located from somewhere. Elena didn’t ask. She didn’t even refuse the pistol when it was pressed into her hand, though her fingers shook around the grip.

Pip had let go of her hand. Dandelion and Clover had pushed him between the two of them, urging him onwards in the dimly-lit corridor. Elena fought to keep up with them, gathering her dress in both hands as Snowdrop trailed behind her.

A pistol cracked through the air, shooting the plaster from the ceiling. “That was a warning shot,” called a voice. “I shall not miss next time.”

Elena whirled around. Standing at the entrance to the passage was Prince Nero, brandishing a pistol, his expression quietly furious.

He cocked it again, aiming it at Dandelion. “Let go of my friend.”

“We’re trying to save him—” Elena started.

Before she could finish her sentence, Snowdrop hurtled forward, smacking into Nero’s middle and knocking him to the floor. The pistol shot out of reach. Nero grappled with her, trying to push her off him. He grabbed her mask and wrenched it from her face. It shattered to the floor in a cloud of dust.

Nero stopped moving. He stared at Snowdrop, her face twisted with rage. He looked like he had seen a ghost.

“Ivy?” he whispered.

Snowdrop did not answer to that name. She continued to glare at him, teeth bared.

“Snow—” Dandelion started, his own face very white, “don’t kill him.”

For one horrible moment, Elena was sure she hadn’t heard him—or didn’t care either way. She was certain Snowdrop was going to do it, and Elena didn’t want Nero to die. Because somehow, she knew he *had* seen her under the bed, and had let her go. He hadn’t shot to kill them just now. He’d called Pip his friend.

And he didn’t like Mira.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Snowdrop stared at the nearby gun, and then back to Nero. He had not yet moved a single muscle. His gaze was still rooted on Snowdrop like she was some kind of mirage.

"Iv—"

"The next time I see you, I'll kill you," Snowdrop said, and then punched him unconscious.

She climbed to her feet, shedding loose clothing. Brass buckles and pads clanged to the ground. "Come on," she said. "We need to get out of here."



They raced through the servants' passages, Snowdrop now in the lead. She whizzed down the corridors like a rat in a maze, sliding around anyone that got in her way. None of the servants tried to stop her, although a few screamed and gasped.

"Is that—"

"No, it can't be—"

"She's dead. We saw her—"

There was no time to stop and wonder what they were talking about. No time to stop and think at all. They sprinted through the kitchens until they came to a store room at the back. Dandelion slammed the door shut behind him, and one of the smaller automatons whizzed out from Snowdrop's skirt to jam the lock.

"How long do you think we have?" Snowdrop asked, racing towards a chute in the corner.

“Minutes, if we’re lucky,” said Dandelion. “How’re we doing, Clover?”

Clover had scooted over to a small control panel near the chute and was desperately punching buttons. “I just need another minute…”

Sounds of guards charging through the kitchens blazed behind the door. Someone shoved against it.

“We may not have that long…”

“Do you want to be chopped up into tiny pieces?”

Elena blanched.

“A couple of friends of ours escaped using a waste chute a few month’s back,” Snowdrop explained. “The palace decided to add a new element to their disposal lines after that.”

Elena didn’t want to think about how they knew that piece of information, and prayed they had some insider passing information they’d simply neglected to tell her about.

Something pinged on Clover’s control panel. A light flashed green.

“Go!” he said. “Go, go!”

Snowdrop grabbed Pip and shoved him into the narrow, steely tunnel. He shot down with a sharp scream. Clover went next. Snowdrop turned to Elena, whipping out a dagger. “Your dress,” she said, “you’ll never get down wearing it.”

Elena didn’t argue, didn’t even wince when Snowdrop sheared the beautiful fabric away from her, slicing through the

hoop skirt and leaving her with only a few raggedy pieces that gave her a semblance of modesty.

She crammed herself into the chute before she could think too much on it, sliding down into the dark, Pip's screams still echoing around her. How far did the tunnel go? On and on it went, pitch black and reeking, the sides coated with slime.

She kept her mouth and eyes tightly shut, not daring to open either until she landed in a soggy, disgusting mess of food and waste—potato peelings, chicken bones, mountains of grease and gunk.

She'd never get clean again.

"Elena!" Clover reached over to pull her out of the way, just in time for Dandelion to come hurtling down after her, followed by Snowdrop.

A rumble sounded in the tunnel behind him, and half of the chute came crashing into the muck after them.

"You set off a grenade with yourself in the tunnel?" Pip screamed incredulously. He'd managed to scramble out of the pit and was standing by the side, drenched in filth.

Snowdrop shrugged. "It's just in case they had any ideas about following us."

"Oy!" sounded a voice overhead. "Who goes there?"

A guard appeared on a platform above them. Realising there was no way they were on legitimate business, he moved towards to the wall, to fetch help or sound the alarm—

Snowdrop whipped out her pistol and shot him. He fell several feet onto the concrete floor below, landing with a sickening *crunch.*

Pip winced. He looked like he wanted to be sick.

Elena couldn't blame him.

Dandelion raced forward, searching through the guard's pockets and finding a set of keys. He dashed towards the door, slamming them into the lock. Elena hated to think of how they planned to get out if the guard hadn't been there. Another explosion?

"Elena, Phillippe, please get behind me," Snowdrop instructed. "Clover, take the rear."

Dandelion wrenched open the door, sliding through carefully, hugging the wall. The rest of them followed, shedding muck behind them. Another guard met them at the end of the corridor, but Dandelion shot her in the leg and they sprinted over her whimpering form.

Elena couldn't look Pip in the eyes. What he must think of them now.

Them.

She was a rebel now.

They reached the outside of the compound, holding another guard at gunpoint, forcing him to open the doors. The gates creaked open, and they ran forward into the night.



A few streets later, lungs burning, Snowdrop pulled them into an alley and whipped out several bags that she or one of the others must have stashed there earlier. They shed their clothes and pulled on cloaks, dousing themselves in a little water and rinsing the foul tastes out of their mouths as well as they could. They threw everything into a trash container afterwards, Dandelion hammering on a door as they passed it. Someone—a nameless ally—was out in seconds, brandishing matches and fuel, setting it alight.

Elena didn't stop to watch it burn. Already they were moving onwards, down into the underground again, Dandelion muttering under his breath about how he hoped Buttercup was doing all right.

She tried to catch up with Pip, tried to catch his gaze, but it was firmly fixed on the path in front of them and didn't waver once. He was a pale, walking statue.

Say something, she begged him, at the same time yelling at herself to do the same. But the words didn't come. Nothing did.

Finally, they found their way onto an abandoned platform, where Buttercup was waiting for them, together with the train—minus the final carriage. He'd obviously abandoned his hostages elsewhere. Elena hoped they were all right; she

hadn’t wanted to terrify Sofia. Someone would surely find them soon.

Buttercup ran to embrace his husband, not even caring that he was still covered in muck.

“We did it?” he whispered into his neck, half crushing him.

Dandelion smiled, easing out of his grip and gesturing to Pip. “We did.”

Buttercup beamed. “Your Highness,” he said, dropping into a bow. “I wish I had more to welcome you, but please—we must hurry.”

Pip stared white faced at them all, looking like he wanted to bolt away from everything, but Buttercup opened up the door and ushered him inside, returning to the driver’s seat. The train rumbled back into life.

Elena hesitated before climbing on board. She hardly knew why. She’d never liked it in Petragrad. It had never been her home. Everyone was on that train. A chance for a better world, an offer of freedom. *Pip.*

“It’s all right,” said Snowdrop knowingly, brushing her back. “I was afraid, too.”

Elena swallowed, and stepped on board.

She didn’t breathe until they were pulling away.

Clover let out a long, low whistle. “Well, that was a close one!”

“We’ll be free of the city in an hour,” Snowdrop remarked. “We’ll take the train as far as we dare, then blow up the tunnel and head out to the wasteland on foot.”

“The wasteland?” Pip croaked. “The radioactive wasteland? You’re taking me there?”

“It’s not radioactive,” Snowdrop said. “Long story. Another time. You’re safe now, Phillippe. Trust me.”

“You want me to trust the people that *kidnapped me?*”

Elena frowned. “We didn’t kidnap you, you came with us.”

“I was confused! You said my life was in danger and I panicked! How do I know you’re not going to try and kill me __”

Elena’s heart tightened. He couldn’t possibly think that she’d hurt him, that after everything, this was some kind of trap. He’d taken her hand. He hadn’t resisted.

Had he done all of that because he was *afraid*?

“Because,” said Snowdrop, “they didn’t kill *me*.”

Elena and Pip both turned to stare at her. A strange air had covered her, both monumental and casual—like someone trying to sound indifferent in the face of death. She knew exactly how dark her words were and was trying to downplay it.

“They didn’t kill my father, either,” Snowdrop continued. “Mira did.”

“I’m sorry,” said Pip, rubbing his temples, “but am I supposed to know who you are? Forgive me if I sound impolite, I’ve had rather a trying day.”

Snowdrop snorted, shaking out her hair. “I’m not surprised you don’t recognise me. No one ever does. Except Nero, apparently. And a few of the servants. I’ll wager Mira would have too, if she’d seen me. But it has been a very long time…” She took a bow, so deep she almost touched the floor. “I was born Princess Ivory of Petragrad.”

Elena took a sharp breath. So did Pip. The other members of the party merely shrugged—this was clearly old news to them.

No wonder Prince Nero had recognised her. He’d half grown up in the palace. What had he called her? *Ivy*? Had Elena misheard, or was that some old nickname he had for her?

“I joined the rebellion to protect myself from Mira after she tried to have me killed,” Snowdrop continued. “I left my old life behind and moved to the wastelands. The world out there… it’s not what you’ve been led to believe. Nothing is.”

Pip looked up at her, gaze solid. “What do you want from me?”

“An alliance, hopefully,” Snowdrop went on. “Or at very least, to figure out why Sparta wants you dead.”

“Sparta wants me dead?”

Snowdrop nodded. “We intercepted a message about two weeks ago that said they were going to assassinate you.”

“But—why?”

“We don’t know. It could be because they’ve heard your father is ill and expect you to be the next king soon—”

Elena coughed. It seemed cruel to bring up such a fact now. Poor Pip was having a hard enough time as it was.

“—Or it could be nothing to do with you, just the message it sends. Like how the Rebellion lost a lot of support following my apparent demise when it was blamed on them.”

Pip frowned. “Why did you stay dead, then? Why run away —”

“Because Mira wants me dead, and I like being alive,” Snowdrop explained. “If she knows I’m alive, I’m a target. I’m of more use to the Rebellion as a ghost.”

“A very bossy ghost,” muttered Clover, not quietly.

“A ghost with natural leadership qualities,” Snowdrop corrected. “And a desire to do some good in the world. I think you share that vision, don’t you Pip?”

Pip went quiet. “And if I refuse to help you?”

“Then we’ll send you back to your kingdom, no harm done. But if you’re half the person Elena thinks you are, I’m hoping that you will help us. People are dying, Your Highness. I’d like your help to stop that.”

Pip ran his hands through his hair, his face grey, form shaking. “My father,” he said, “you know he isn’t well. There’s a chance that… I should go back to Toulouse.”

Snowdrop nodded. “I understand that,” she said, “believe me, I do. And we shall try to get you back to him. But Sparta is still after you. We need to find out why.”

Pip swallowed. “All right, then.”

“We will get you there,” Snowdrop promised. “As soon as we can. But Sparta can get to you there too. It may be that there is nowhere safe for you right now.”

Pip did not respond. His eyes glistened with tears. Elena wanted to go to him, but Snowdrop squeezed his shoulder first. “Get cleaned up,” she said, “then get some rest. We’ve a long journey ahead of us.”

She shuffled off towards the driver’s carriage, no doubt to converse with Buttercup.

Elena came to Pip’s side. “Pip—”

He moved away from her hand.

Of everything that had happened in the past few hours, that hurt a thousand times more.

“You lied to me,” he hissed.

“No, I didn’t!” she said. “I didn’t even know who you were —”

“You expect me to believe that?”

Elena took a step back, a hundred apologies and excuses rising on her tongue. But then something else bubbled in their place.

She had been slapped, belittled, shot at and chased. She had plunged into a mountain of waste and risked her life. For him.

And he was angry at *her?*

All her life, she had tried to do the right thing. She had put other people's comfort above her own. She had sacrificed and suffered and survived without praise or thanks, starving of kindness.

It was too much. It was not enough.

"You lied to me, too, you know!" she snapped, tears burning behind her eyes. "Actually, actively lied. So I'm sorry if you're having a terrible day, but I nearly died trying to save you, and you dare accuse *me* of lying?"

She marched away from him, heading to the next carriage. It was a ridiculous, opulent, over the top bathroom in terracotta pink and gold. Clover stood by the sink, half-naked. He blinked as Elena approached.

"I'm going first," she said.

Clover did not complain. He turned off the taps, grabbed his filthy shirt, and headed back to the others.

Elena stripped herself and tumbled into the bath. She found a bar of soap and scrubbed herself raw, not caring that there were others waiting to use it, not caring that there wasn't time to linger and others were sitting in their own filth too. Let them wait. She'd been sitting in filth for the last five years.

No more.

No more.

Her skin scraped, her hair devoid of muck, her fingernails scrubbed, she wrapped herself in a towel and headed back to the others. Someone—Snowdrop, probably—had set aside her old clothes for her. She took them into another carriage to change, avoiding Pip's gaze. It wasn't hard. He was staring out of the window at the blackened tunnel as they hurtled down it, even though there was nothing to look at.

Snowdrop caught her gaze when she returned, fully clothed. She frowned when Elena sat away from him. "Trouble?" she asked, dropping into the seat beside her.

"He's angry at me. He thinks… well, it doesn't matter. He has no right to be angry either way."

Snowdrop patted her hand. "No one can stay mad at you for long, cousin. He'll be back to worshipping the air around you before long, I'm sure."

Elena smiled weakly, wishing she could believe that. "Cousin?"

"You said we were distantly related, didn't you?"

"I—yes. I suppose so. But well… it's very distant."

"Good. Makes my one-sided crush on you slightly less weird."

Elena laughed.

"I don't have much in the way of relatives," Snowdrop continued. "It is nice to have one I don't despise."

“You mean you don’t get along with your dear stepmama?”

Snowdrop chuckled. She extended her pinkie finger. “Evil stepmother club?”

“Allies to the end.” Elena linked her finger into hers and squeezed it. “Friends, even.”

“Friends,” Snowdrop agreed. “And I think you’ll find I’m a very good one. If Pip doesn’t wise up, I’ll shoot him for you.”

“You’re supposed to make an alliance with him.”

“Friends before alliances. Girl’s code.”

“You are making things up.”

“Yes, but I’m hilarious, so who cares?”

The bathroom door clicked open, and Clover emerged. Snowdrop got out of her seat. “I’m going to freshen up,” she said. “I don’t think we have much longer until we need to blow something up. I’d like not to reek of bin juice when we do.”

She disappeared. Clover headed to the front carriage. Dandelion was already gone. Elena found herself completely alone with Pip once more. She was still too angry to explain things, and she supposed he had a lot to think about too. Maybe they both needed time. Maybe…

She stood up, and crossed the carriage to stand beside him, searching for the words.

I didn’t pretend anything.

I wanted to tell you from the start.

I'm so sorry for all of this.

I hate that you're angry with me.

I love you. I love you. I love you—

Light blossomed at the end of the tunnel, blistering, so sharp and sudden that both Pip and Elena raised their arms to shield themselves from it. A few seconds later, it had flooded the entire train.

Elena's eyes adjusted quickly. They were outside of the city, skirting through the golden sands under the glass tunnel that had brought her here all those years ago. The cold desert stretched for miles, but in the distance mountains glimmered, grey and brilliant and surrounded by a sea of green. Dawn lit up the skies, a moving canvas of ochre and lavender.

"It's beautiful," Pip whispered.

Elena sat beside him, their hands only inches apart. "Yes," she said, "it is."

And they were free.



EPILOGUE

Dr Asami Thorne stared down at her notes, tapping her pen against them absent-mindedly, and found—quite ludicrously—that she couldn't understand a single thing she'd written the day before.

Outside, birds were singing in the branches that held up her bedroom. Real sunlight pooled across the wooden floors. For three months, this had been her home. She was still struggling to get used to all the light, to the lack of constant rumbling, and to the sweet, smoky smell of warm cedar.

She liked it almost as much as the scent of Beau's skin, warmed by the sun.

"Stop worrying," said Beau from the bed, as her tapping increased.

Asami looked up. Beau was lying on the bed, his good arm tucked under his head. His other—larger and slightly lumpy—lay across his stomach. She liked it just as much as the rest of him.

“I said nothing!” she said.

“Your silence did.”

Asami sighed. “How are you so good at reading me?”

“Months living in close quarters and staring at you adoringly from a distance. You’re very cute when you work. Makes it easier.”

“Stop flirting with me. I’m trying to concentrate.”

“You’ve just read the same page three times. You’re *failing* to concentrate. You might as well give up and do something that you never, ever fail at…”

Asami put down her book and peered at him over the rim of her glasses. “I cannot imagine what you mean.”

“I am willing to draw you a diagram. I know you like those.”

Asami laughed. She gave up on her work and came and sat on the bed beside him, stroking his loose curls from his face. Her fingers brushed against the ragged skin that covered most of his left side—the welts and contusions caused by experiments that had been done to him years ago when he was a soldier. When they’d first met, he’d hated them. He never let her touch them, had gone to drastic lengths to fix himself and —

Well. That didn’t matter right now. What mattered was that he was still here, and that he was finally able to let her touch him wherever.

And whenever.

And *often.*

Beau smiled, though only half of his mouth completed the action. He leant up and cupped her face. “Were you worrying about me again?”

“Actually, your latest test results were quite promising. No, I’m worried about Snowdrop and the others.”

“They aren’t late yet.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t worry.”

She sighed, glancing across at the clock on her desk as if she could speed up time if she gave it enough attention. They were due back today, if they were coming at all.

Asami didn’t want to think about what would happen if they didn’t, or if they’d failed. If Prince Phillippe had been killed, if Snowdrop had…

“They’ll be *fine,*” Beau insisted.

“Stop reading my mind!”

Beau laughed, pulling her in for a kiss that lasted a little too long and gave her all sorts of deeply distracting thoughts. Which, she supposed, was rather the point. She let her fingers glide towards his neck, skirt the top of his impressive pectorals. His own hands slid up her thighs, brushing the tops of her ribboned stockings—

A bell sounded from outside, crisp and clear.

“Ignore it,” Beau groaned into her mouth. “They’ll save us some lunch…”

Asami glanced at the clock again. It was at least an hour until lunchtime.

“It’s not lunch,” she told him, scrambling off the bed. She ran to the door, scooting out onto the stairs that wrapped around the giant tree the rebels had built their base around. Through the trees she could make out six figures walking into the camp. Buttercup, Dandelion, Clover, Snowdrop, a brown-skinned girl she didn’t know, and…

And Phillippe, crown prince of Toulouse. Her home country. Possibly the key to ending this all, once and for all.

She turned back to Beau, face beaming.

“They’ve done it.”

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About the Author



Born and raised in Redditch, Worcestershire, to a couple of kick-ass parents, Katherine “Kate” Macdonald often bemoaned the fact that she would never be a successful author as “the key to good writing is an unhappy childhood“.

Since her youth, Macdonald has always been a storyteller, inventing fantastically long and complicated tales to entertain her younger sister with on long drives. Some of these were written down, and others have been lost to the ethers of time somewhere along the A303.

With a degree in creative writing and eight years of teaching English under her belt, Macdonald thinks there’s a slight possibility she might actually be able to write. She may be very wrong.

She currently lives in Devon with her manic toddler, in a charming Victorian terrace.

“A Slipper in the Smoke” is her 20th novel.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor, or subscribe to her website at www.katherinemacdonaldauthor.com to be notified of new releases and free review copies!